DIRECTORS' DIARIES

THE ROAD TO THEIR FIRST FILM

RAKESH ANAND BAKSHI

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To those who were there, and are not,
and to those who were there, and are:
my mother, Kamla Mohan,
my father, Anand Prakash Bakshi,
my brother, Rajesh (Gogi), and
my sisters, Suman (Pappi) and Kavita (Rani)

I love you all, even though I may not always express it.

This book is a tribute to my father, lyrics writer Anand Bakshi, (Anand Prakash Bakshi) who wrote nearly 3,300 songs for 623 Hindi and Punjabi films, from 1956 to 2002.

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FOREWORD

MEGHNA GHAI PURI

'Film-making is a chance to lead many lifetimes…'

– Robert Altman

Robert Altman's quote celebrates film-making like no other. It also sums up the dedication and passion that one needs to be a film-maker. Each film is akin to living a full lifetime of joy, sorrow, success, failure, agony and ecstasy. Every film-maker must understand this and with each roll of the dice, take a fickle audiences reaction in their stride.

The Western world has had a long history of teaching film-making and film-makers. The culture of film schools being a strong breeding ground for creativity and a professional approach has existed for many years in the West. India though has lagged behind in this. We are still a young country and an emerging India needed engineers, accountants and lawyers more than creative prima donnas.

Yet, India has had some wonderful film-makers. Despite the lack of education, India's film-makers and films have thrived on a self-taught, vocational method of learning, coupled with genuine genius. This book seeks to tell some of the stories of this wonderful array of film-makers. Each one is an institution in themselves with a body of work that any film school will be happy to incorporate into its curriculum.

Future generations of film-makers need a repository such as this. A place they can seek answers to questions and have an in-depth study about how the masters themselves grappled with similar issues. For every director will undergo myriad challenges. Only those who face up to them will last and leave a legacy similar to the celebrated artists in this book.

A director is the 'captain of the ship'. A man that everyone turns to in an hour of crisis. Reading about experiences of others helps upcoming film-makers realize that direction is about more than just handling an individual vision, it is about handling people – artists, technicians, financiers, distributors, media, audiences, critics, etc. A director has to deal with all these different individuals and do it with a certain panache if he or she hopes to be successful in the profession. This cannot be taught. No school can prepare an aspirant for this. Experience really is the best teacher in this case and in this book you are learning from the best of the best.

As the president of Asia's largest film school, it has been my

privilege to hear many of the directors in this book speak to students. The knowledge they pass on is invaluable. It can sometimes spell the difference between making a career in cinema and returning to a family business. A word of encouragement or a connection of mindsets through a similar journey can suddenly open a student's mind like no book or project. These tools can then aid the student to reinforce that open mind.

We have found that this blend of experiential teaching prepares students and aspirants for the challenges ahead better than anything else and we are proud to have some of these names associated with us and thrilled that this book now exists for students to hungrily devour as they seek more and more knowledge about this most complex of arts.

So here is a chance to live many lifetimes. Through the eyes of several of India's most celebrated film-makers. They share their experiences of the past from which we can learn and use as a guide to a great future.

MEGHNA GHAI PURI
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FOREWORD

PROF. KARL BARDOSH

One of the greatest directors in the world of cinema, Federico Fellini, made a small masterpiece, *Orchestra Rehearsal*, about great musicians of an orchestra revolting against the conductor, resulting in cacophony. It's a metaphor about chaos versus order, but it perfectly refers to the film director's job.

In another huge masterpiece and Oscar winner, 8½, Fellini tells the story of a film director, who, after much soul searching, decides to abandon the making of a sci-fi genre movie in favour of one that's about his own personal life experiences, his wife and his lovers, his parents' passing away, his childhood memories, etc.

Fellini's dilemma is clear: direct a genre movie as an industry assignment or create a film of more personal expression.

There are three types of directors at work in the world: craft, mise en scène and auteur (author).

Craft directors outnumber all others, they direct non-narrative programmes from coverage of sport events, parades, reality shows, commercials (without actors), corporate and web videos, etc. They basically package information in different audio-visual formats expertly. Mise en scène directors (the term literally means 'placing on stage' in French) deal with the 'queen of the media', narrative storytelling, however, only in genres clearly defined by the film and television industry and the marketplace. These genre of directors make everything ranging from run-of-the-mill television series to pretty successful feature films.

Genres are one per film in Hollywood like horror, action, mystery, etc., while in traditional Bollywood it is a 'masala' of several genres to cater to every member of the audience within the same film. The best mise en scène directors are able to put a personal touch on the genre piece and there are a few truly exceptional ones like Roman Polanski and Alfred Hitchcock who can subvert the genre for a new and deeper message. Polanski's *Chinatown* portrays law enforcement as the real criminals for the first time and in *Psycho*, Hitchcock shows how mundane, petty crime is avenged by an irrational lunatic as brutal as nature can be. An irrational horror underneath the fragile veneer of human existence bursts to the surface. This is a philosophical layer under the story and that is what distinguishes the auteur (author) directors. These are the smallest group of directors, working mostly beyond genres, commenting on the human condition in the universe.

That is what really the term auteur means, not simply a director who also writes the screenplay, if that is firmly within the world of the genres. Auteurs comment on the universe and on the human condition even when they work in comedies – think of Charlie Chaplin, Jacques Tati or Woody Allen. After all, philosophical comedy reaches all the way back to the Enlightenment, like in Voltaire.

All in all, directors have come a long way from being the sidekick of the cinematographers in early film-making providing crowd control to the visionary storytellers of our time.

Can people be taught to become directors? Most certainly. As a film educator, educating hundreds of directors on all levels, I can safely say that anyone can be taught to become a decent craft, or even a genre director (the audience will not notice that they are mediocre as at least 80 per cent of all products are mediocre). However, you cannot teach the auteurs beyond craft because that is an innate artistic quality.

I always tell my students that they will never find a 'Help Wanted' ad for a feature film director in the newspaper. That job actually does not exist, you have to create that job for yourself by studying, by perseverance, by devotion and hard work.

The personal stories of some outstanding Indian directors in this book do shed light on that mysterious adventure that leads to becoming a film director.

PROF. KARL BARDOSH
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INTRODUCTION

A thought that has always fascinated me is, 'Our past makes our present; our present makes our future.' Sometime in 2002, I read in a book that David Lean, the English film director known for films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dr Zhivago*, used to be a tea boy. He then became a messenger, then an editor and finally a director. It made me wonder about David Lean's life and I thought if he hadn't started as a tea boy, he perhaps wouldn't have become a director. Maybe he would not have discovered his love for films. I became interested in his life and the detours it must have taken to bring him where he was supposed to be. What did he do before he became a tea boy? What other jobs did he have before he became an editor? What sort of friends did he have? What films did he watch and what books did he read? What determined the course of his life?

These questions led me to the idea of this book, especially when I realized how little we know about the lives and influences of the film-makers that are closer to our own reality. I had read books on directors, cinematographers, editors, etc., and about the various experiences and encounters that led them to film-making. I learnt about how they got their first break and their experiences on their first film, and it made me curious about the various experiences directors of Hindi films must have had. But to my dismay, I could not find any book which documented these directors' voices and how they ended up in film-making. I also realized that most people who aspire to be film directors often find the path to their dream unfathomable, because most of them and their families do not have background in films.

But maybe it had nothing to do with that. I belong to a family involved in films and I had studied film-making, acting and writing abroad. I had also assisted an excellent writer and director. And yet I couldn't make a film. I wondered, sometimes almost angrily, how so many people without any background in films managed to direct films. There was an angst in me to explore how they managed to make a film but I didn't. And this curiosity and anguish is shared by millions of others who are trying to make it into the industry! I knew there was a book here. This thirst and hunger to know how directors I admire make films urged me to interview them, to somehow know them and their creative processes better. Some of the questions to which I had always wanted answers were: What constitutes a director, emotionally or otherwise? Can a person educate himself/herself to be a film-

maker? How does one end up here and how does one get their first break in this industry? I wanted to know more about their experiences and influences as I knew that even my answers lay there.

I once asked screenwriter Salim Khan to define a film director. He replied: 'Frank Capra made a film after a gap of nearly five years. He was asked, "Why took you so long to make your new film?" Capra replied: "I did not have anything to say, until now!" On the other hand, a journalist complimented an outstanding prime minister of a country, "Sir, you speak well; and you really know what to say!" The prime minister replied, "It's more important to know when to be or remain silent." For me, both define a director.'

The director is the ultimate designer of the film. He or she creates the context in which every person's work involved in the film-making process is given a shape. A good director ensures that all individual parts and all individual contributions are creatively brought together. The totality reflects his or her fundamental ideas, dreams, beliefs, convictions, about life and films at that moment in time. A director evolves professionally and personally with every film, so direction is a wonderful imprint of their mark on every frame, akin to an artist who signs his paintings saying 'This is how I see things!' at that point in time.

Film-making can be akin to a military exercise. The director can be a general who disguises himself as a common soldier to dig creative trenches in the minds of his creative collaborators and contributors. He is the ultimate illusionist. He nurtures an atmosphere of democracy even though hidden in this magician's sleeves can be discreet aggression, a secret dictatorship. He can imbue in his collaborators a powerful belief in their abilities, even those not up to the mark, and that will invariably bring the best out of them. The talent common to all directors is their ability to communicate across the film-making spectrum: actors, editors, costume makers, lyricists, composers, production team, and make all involved feel one.

The process of film-making is often challenging, frustrating, tiring, viciously demanding, painful, certainly stressful, yet it is the most satisfying work for these directors who bared their experiences in this book. In spite of the angst, they loved their journey through every film.

I think, beyond the gratitude, the best reward a director can hand to the collaborators and contributors to his art and craft is a great film! Because that is what they really need for knowingly or unknowingly permitting the director to enter their innermost selves to love, encourage, manipulate, inspire, coerce, motivate, bully them, or whatever else was necessary for the director to make them deliver their very best.

From the many books and biographies I read on film-makers, I knew that if one were to study patterns or look for methods to come to films and to earn one's first break as a director, they will be standard ones: building rare, valuable skills and honing those skills to perfection through a variety of experiences. Every experience, good or bad, rare or common, leaves its imprint on the mind.

One way to put together the puzzle of entering the world of film-making and getting to make your first film as a director is to learn from the significant experiences shared by a variety of successful and masterful directors of Hindi cinema, and to find out how they earned their first break and how they continued on this path of film-making.

My goal was to put together some significant life stories, and valuable experiences and memories of eminent and some relatively new directors. However, I wasn't sure if anyone would be interested in such a document but I later realized how important it is to make their voices available to all those who are looking for motivation, inspiration and knowledge.

Some of the directors had such inspiring experiences that I often lost the radar of my questions as they travelled from one part of their life to another. I also got to know that many of the film-makers were well read and were equally interested in other forms of art. Their interest in the arts contributed greatly to their own films as most of them were actively involved in the writing of their films. It was their imaginative prowess that painted the picture of their lives on my mind so beautifully that I was almost lost in their world. I am not surprised that directors seek their roots in storytellers. Almost every interview made me contemplate my own beliefs and convictions. Sometimes, during an interview, I found myself introspecting about my choices and opinions.

I came to films later in life, after dabbling in other professions, but owing to my father's illustrious film career as a lyricist, I knew my way around this elusive industry. Some directors politely refused to be interviewed, some were just not interested but the ones who did speak to me renewed my faith in the art of cinema. I would also like to thank my father, lyricist Anand Bakshi, whose career of nearly fifty years helped me meet some of these directors.

An important thing I learnt from these interviews is that cinema is not a destination for most film-makers; it is a journey which continues even after one makes their first film, even after making many successful ones. I wanted to share the varied journey of these directors from their childhood to their first film because that is what shaped their lives and moulded them into the people they are today. I realized that the environment you grew up in, the choices you made as a child and an adult, the highs and lows that accompanied the choices you

made, the joys and sorrows, determined your fate, led you to your first film.

Our deep interactions took them down memory lane and they experienced such a range of emotions and memories that the interviews evolved into something more meaningful and intimate and so far, those moments were some of the most rewarding of my life. I hope it was as nourishing for them as it was for me. Some directors said the interview helped them bare their real selves. For some, it was as cathartic as a session with a psychiatrist. Such heart-warming responses gave me the courage to meet more directors and take this book further. As I met more film-makers, the flame of inspiration that sparked within me grew in intensity. And almost every director I met told me, either in tone or in words, that their ways and opinions are not the gospel of truth, and their methods keep evolving with every film and experience. I would like to mention here that this book is also a tribute to the world's first full-length feature film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), directed by Charles Tait; and to *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), directed by Dadasaheb Phalke, the first feature film made in India.

Each interview in this book left me feeling enriched and today I am more fulfilled than ever because of the things that these directors' choices, stories, experiences and lives taught me. And that is what I hope this book does for anyone who aspires to be something in his or her life. Most importantly, I hope this effort can help someone make a film some day.

'You've got to make your own breaks!
You've got to write your own biography'

– Anand Bakshi

ANURAG BASU

'Film-making is like entering a dark tunnel with a small torch, whether you are making your first film, or any other. The path is mostly dark, and gradually as you proceed with a lighted torch, you see only a part of the way ahead of you and a little around you, but you will never be able to see all the way. No one can see the end of the tunnel. All you have, often, is just one beam of light to follow.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Saaya (2003), *Murder* (2004), *Gangster* (2006), *Life in a Metro* (2007), *Kites* (2010), *Barfi* (2012)

SNEAK PEEK

Anurag Basu grew up in Bhilai, Chhattisgarh; wrote, acted, and directed plays in school and college; migrated to Mumbai in 1993 with his family because his father wanted to be an actor; directed his first play, *College*, during his college years, 1989–90; acted as 'friend of the hero', a junior artist, in Prakash Mehra's film, *Dalaal* (1993); worked as a background dancer to earn some extra money; worked as a third assistant cinematographer as focus puller; worked as an assistant to a make-up artist/director; worked as an assistant director to TV producer and director Raman Kumar; directed first TV show, *Tara*, in 1998; wrote, directed, photographed the TV show, *Ajeeb Dastan*, for Star Plus; resigned as director midway through *Kucch Toh Hai* (2003); directed first film *Saaya* (2003). From his first job in films to his first film as director, it was a journey of nearly eleven years.

MY TAKE

I met Anurag Basu for the first time just a few weeks before he was detected with cancer. He had already directed *Murder* (2004), a successful film. What I recollect clearly is that even while he was hospitalized, and the doctors had said he may not survive, he continued to enquire after his project. I was working with a large production house then and his project was pitched to us. Production of films, the process that goes behind approving a film project, is very complex, and no one could really give him a definite answer if or when his film would go on the floors. Yet, he remained very

enthusiastic, even though he was hospitalized. I lost touch with him for many years thereafter, until I met him for my book while he was making *Barfi* (2012). He was in post-production, and yet met me without panicking in spite of the fact I that took up nearly four to five hours of his time. He seemed in control and confident of the stage he was at. I bow to his spirit of survival and his sincere enthusiasm to make films. I found him very warm, enthusiastic, witty, easy-going, happy-go-lucky, bindaas and passionate. His humility is moving.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Where were you born, and where did you spend most of your childhood?*
Anurag Basu (AB): I was born in Raipur, Chhattisgarh. I grew up in Bhilai, the steel city of Chhattisgarh. I was there until twelfth standard.

What was the environment at home like?
AB: I am very fortunate that I grew up in a household where my parents were in theatre, they had their own amateur theatre group, Abhiyaan. I spent my childhood in the greenroom. I would do my school homework there while my father would rehearse his lines for the show. My father, an engineer by profession, performed theatre after office. Every year, he would exploit his work-leave to travel with his theatre group.

That is where I learnt, without really being taught, what really makes up theatre. The backstage jobs, stage lighting, artist make-up, actor rehearsals. I observed, without realizing it then, how my father extracted performances from his actors, noticed his interactions with his co-actors, saw how scripts were written and how they evolved during rehearsals and performances. I never considered my father's hobby, of being an actor–writer–director– producer of plays, as a career for myself while growing up. Even my parents never encouraged me towards the arts, or theatre. In fact, they discouraged me.

It was only when I was in college many years later in Mumbai that I seriously began participating in inter-collegiate theatre. It was only then that my father began strictly advising me to concentrate on studies and not indulge in theatre. He would always say, 'Naatak, na-atak' (Don't get stuck in the world of theatre.) *(Laughs)*

What else about your life in Bhilai you think has influenced you as a creative person?
AB: I must have been in the seventh standard when I was introduced to the panthi group of folk dancers from Chhattisgarh. Panthi is an

aggressive folk-dance form. They came to our school to teach us the dance. I participated and loved it. Soon, I got involved with their sub-group of rural dancers, who were farmers by profession. I must thank Devdas Banjaari-ji, the Padma Shri awardee dancer; he encouraged me to join their group. So did my father. I was the only educated and urban child in this group of rural people.

Travelling around the state with these dancers was my first experience of complete independence. I have these rural experiences to thank for maturing faster than my urban friends.

We travelled through the state, performing dances. We never got paid, but we got meals. (*Laughs*) We would mostly sleep under the sky, the fields were our toilet, and we would bathe at the well or by the hand-operated water pumps in the fields. Travelling around the state with these dancers was my first experience of complete independence. I have these rural experiences to thank for maturing faster than my urban friends.

What kind of extra-curricular activities were you engaged in during college years?

AB: I spent my college years in Mumbai. After I passed my twelfth standard at Bhilai, I appeared for my IIT engineering exam, but I did not get through. However, I got through the PET (Pre-Engineering Test for Madhya Pradesh) exams. After that I told my father I wanted to join the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, to study cinema, as I did not want to spend the next five years studying engineering only to do a nine-to-five job.

Nevertheless, my destiny brought me to Mumbai, and not Pune, because my father migrated alone to Mumbai to find work as an actor. I could not join FTII due to my family's changed financial circumstances. I got admission at a college near my house at Mira Road, and I chose physics as my major subject, because I wanted to be a cinematographer. Even at that time, I had absolutely no ambition of being a director.

To earn some pocket money, I became a sales representative for electric switches and plastic chairs. My father did not know I was doing this, because I did not want to trouble him for my college fees. I never even told him how much my college fees really are, and would pay them from my own earnings. I gave tuitions to younger students to keep our finances going. Even my mother worked and brought money to the table.

During those three years in college, I began visiting film sets, film

studios, film producers, and directors, anyone and everyone I could reach, to ask for any job in the film business. So that I could be a part of the film-making process. That was my only focus and ambition then, to work in films in some or any capacity, without knowing in which particular profession of film-making I want to belong.

Why did you choose to begin as a cinematographer?
AB: While I was in college, I already knew the basics about all departments of theatre, except the camera. Theatre does not employ camera in its storytelling, so that was the only tool alien to me. I thought if I could learn about the film camera, I could be a part of cinema with the same confidence. I thought I would be able to understand the technicality of making films only if I understood the camera, and to do that I should start assisting a cinematographer.

As a child, who or what influenced you the most?
AB: My father. He was my idol. His passion for theatre, acting and writing was the most important influence in my life. I had always wanted to emulate him. He would hold a Charminar cigarette between his lips and talk while directing actors. I used to love seeing him writing and composing scenes. I liked his leadership quality; leading the music, the writing, the lighting, everything single-handedly. He was in complete control of everything. I would be in awe of him. *(Smiles)*

How did you start your career in films?
AB: I did not zero down on films as a career until I happened to visit a film set. This was during my second year in college. I was hanging out at Prithvi Theatre and two of my actor friends told me, 'We are going to struggle at Prakash Mehra Productions.' I did not know what the word 'struggle' meant, but I accompanied them because the place they were going to struggle at was walking distance away. *(Laughs)*

We walked to Prakash Mehra Productions office, and I can still remember the names and faces of the assistant directors present then. They were taking auditions of actors for a film titled *Dalaal* (1993). I, too, gave an audition, along with my two actor friends. The assistant director asked me for my photographs, but I did not have any. Yet, I got the role, because the film was bilingual, and I could speak Bengali. Then I asked about the role, and was told, 'Hero ka dost. You are a friend of the hero.' That's it! (*Laughs*) Later, when I told my father about getting a role as a friend of the hero in a film, he allowed me to go ahead only because the shooting was during my college vacations.

On my first day of the shoot, I noticed the camera, the crane, trolleys, lights, etc. I faced the camera on the second day, standing

somewhere behind the hero with three other 'friends of the hero.' (*Laughs*) It was on this set that I noticed first-hand how films are made, and I loved the entire process. Nevertheless, even then I did not know in which profession I wanted to belong in this world; whether I could be a cinematographer, director, actor, or writer, I had no idea. I just knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life in the world of film-making. Before this experience, it was always only about theatre, never about films. This experience of playing a friend of the hero has brought me to the path I walk today.

Once you were certain you wanted to be in films, did you try to get a job as an assistant director?

AB: While I was acting in Dalaal, I did not know if I wanted to be an actor or a director. Honestly, I just wanted to be present on the sets, work on the sets, do any job on the set, so that I could discover how films are made, and explore for myself where I fit best in this world.

On the sets of *Dalaal*, they wanted the hero's friends to dance behind him. Kamal-ji was the choreographer, and he made us all dance. Because I was good at dance, they selected me to dance right behind the hero. For three days, we danced in the hot sun for that song, and I was paid Rs 500 for eight hours of work. Out of curiosity, I asked the background dancers how much were they being paid; they were being paid Rs 850 for eight hours. That was Rs 350 more than what I was getting as a friend of the hero. Therefore, when I was not shooting for *Dalaal*, I began dancing as a crowd-dancer in other films. It was not strictly for the money alone; it was a way of being on film sets legitimately. I could observe from close quarters how films are really made, and help myself discover what I am cut out to do.

Then, because I was a background dancer, I naturally began frequenting Satyam Dance Hall to observe the dancers rehearse. That's when I realized there is almost no respect for dancers. Soon, I got disillusioned by films, and formulated another plan. I decided to complete my physics degree, and apply for a job in some factory or company, and maybe leave films for good.

When you were making your first film, did you ever wish you had gone to film school?

AB: Yes, and I still regret not having studied at FTII. During my growing-up years, I was not exposed to cinema. When I began working in *Dalaal*, and even later, I wished I had attended FTII because in those three years I would have not only learnt the grammar of film-making, but also discovered many films and directors from India, and the world, and would have become familiar with different styles of cinema and film-making. Most importantly, I would not have

been clueless about which department of film-making I truly belong to.

Today, I am no longer uncertain, but because I did not go to film school, I continue to learn about cinema even today. Film-making is like entering a dark tunnel with a small torch, whether you are making your first film, or any other. The path is mostly dark, and gradually as you proceed with a lighted torch, you see only a part of the way ahead of you and a little around you, but you will never be able to see all the way. No can see the end of the tunnel. All you have, often, is just one beam of light to follow.

How did you get the producer of your first film?
AB: I do not consider *Kucch Toh Hai* as my first film as a director. I had no creative control over that film, and had left it midway; I will tell you about what led to *Saaya*. But for now, I will first speak about how I got the opportunity to direct *Kucch Toh Hai*.

I graduated from college in 1995 and by 1996 I was already directing a fiction show for TV, titled *Tara*. Later, I directed TV shows for Balaji Telefilms, where I was the director and the creative director too. I worked in TV for almost six years, directing fiction shows.

While I was doing TV, the first person who called me to direct a film was Mahesh Bhatt. Bhatt Saab is the person who planted the seed in me that I could be a film director. Until then, I never even thought I should be a film director because I was very happy doing TV shows. When I was directing the TV serial *Ajeeb Dastan*, Mahesh Bhatt Saab would visit the set sometimes and praise my work. One day he told me directly, 'You are made for directing films.' My editor, concerned about me, cautioned that Mahesh Bhatt praises people to the level of flattery. Nevertheless, I kept the faith and visited Bhatt Saab's office, Vishesh Films, the next day.

Their office was buzzing with people and activity. I saw Mukesh Bhatt-ji, Vikram Bhatt, and even Tanuja Chandra there, and said a humble hello. Bhatt Saab told me to wait a few minutes, and I did. However, he did not call for me for very long, so I left his office and returned to work on my TV show. *(Laughs)*

Many years later, I happened to meet Mahesh Bhatt Saab and he remembered I had not waited long enough to meet him at his office. He said I should have waited a bit longer to meet him, because he wanted to offer me a film then. I lied to him that I did not wait for long because I had to return to my TV set. *(Laughs)* Can you imagine? Bhatt Saab was the first person in the film business to offer me a film as director, and yet I did not wait to meet him. But even now, after becoming a director, I cannot wait for anyone. *(Laughs)*

One day, I told Ekta Kapoor I did not want to do TV serials any

more. She advised me, 'Do not leave TV; we, Balaji, are planning to make a film with Tusshar (Kapoor). You direct it, Balaji will produce it.' I had worked with Ekta for two years by then, and she had become a good friend. She said she wanted to make a thriller.

Luckily, I had written a thriller and kept it aside for a film someday. I told her about it and she showed interest. I wrote out the screenplay in five days and narrated it to her. She approved it, and that is how my first project *Kucch Toh Hai* was born, my first break as a film director.

Though it did not turn out to be my first film as a director, it was Ekta's first film as a producer, under the Balaji Motion Pictures banner. Destiny had other plans for me, and it was Bhatt Saab and Mukesh Bhatt's film, *Saaya* (2003), that became my first complete film, in the sense that I had complete creative control over the film-making process of *Saaya*.

So how did you get your second film, which is actually your first complete film as director, Saaya?

AB: I got my second chance to direct a film when I happened to meet Bhatt Saab just by chance at New Delhi airport; this was nearly three years after I had walked away impatiently from his office. He asked me what I was doing at the time, and I told him I was directing a film but had left it during its production because of creative differences with my producer. He asked me for my number.

By the time I was back in Mumbai, he called me and offered me a film to direct for his banner. That film was *Saaya*. I consider that my first film as director, because, good or bad, it is the film I made with my own creative choices and complete creative freedom as director.

You have lot of experience in theatre, TV and cinema. What are your fundamental experiences in theatre and TV?

AB: In theatre, because you deal mainly with scripts and actors, there is no interference from camera, editing, trolley and crane,

An important lesson in theatre comes from the almost two months of rehearsals required for a play. Rehearsals over such long periods help you gain skills of how to extract and evolve an actor's performance. Team spirit and mutual trust are other great learnings from theatre.

etc., so the director's skills on the scene and actor sharpen. You also

gain knowledge of how to block and stage a scene.

An important lesson in theatre comes from the almost two months of rehearsals required for a play. Rehearsals over such long periods help you gain skills of how to extract and evolve an actor's performance. Team spirit and mutual trust are other great learnings from theatre, because the spontaneity of performance comes from trust. You learn to trust your actors to the extent that, even if he or she forgets an entire page of dialogue, he is somehow not going to let the audience know that, and manage well in a discreet manner, and without losing the content or confidence on stage. Before the show, as a director, you have to give the actors everything you have, since there is no second take during a live performance.

I learnt the value of making a budget, and sticking to it from working in television. Thanks to my knowledge of budgeting, I can make any film in any budget today.

As for TV, if I had not done TV, I would never have reached here today. I learnt the value of making a budget, and sticking to it from working in television. Thanks to my knowledge of budgeting, I can make any film in any budget today. In TV, you are constantly running against time, you have to deliver an episode every day come what may, because the show is on-air. Such high stakes give you discipline. In my case, I was also the writer of the shows I directed, so I had to write and shoot each and every day. In cinema, we write a two-hour film at one go. In TV, you need to write a thirty-minute episode each and every day. I think a person from TV can make a film, but a person from cinema may not be able to do TV effectively. TV makes you think on your feet day in and day out.

If you ask me to grade the four arts, I would say, theatre is the most difficult, next TV, then cinema, and last but not the least, directing TV commercials.

Another thing one learns from television is experimentation. You break the grammar, try out different lighting, etc. And whatever you do, you can see the result within a couple of days or a week at most. Also, digital media is far cheaper than film raw stock. In films, you have to be explicitly clear before the camera begins to roll, as film stock is very expensive. If you ask me to grade the four arts, I would say, theatre is the most difficult, next TV, then cinema, and last but not the least, directing TV commercials.

How do you get the best out of an actor? Is it good for a director to learn the basics of acting?

AB: If you know a little about acting, it will help. Sometimes, to direct an actor you have to get into the actor's shoes, into his or her head, to be able to tell him convincingly what to do.

Honestly, as a director, I feel the most privileged on set. An actor plays just one character in the film. If the film has fifty characters, the director plays all fifty in his head. And to be able to play it well, the director has to first understand the character. If the director understands the character, he or she need not learn acting or be a professional actor.

Let me tell you my usual process of directing actors. One of the direction assistants I always hire is an actor; and it does not matter if it is his or her first film as an assistant. I first stage the action between us. At this stage, I do not even think about camera placement, angle and lens because I first need to understand the space the actors are in, to discover the spatial relationship between the actor and the space that surrounds the actor. I make this actor-assistant perform the scene along with me playing his or her co-actor; it is a low-energy, mechanical and amateur performance. But one that gives me, and even the cinematographer, a good sense of how the actors will naturally appear and move in that space.

Then I call the actors and show them the way my assistant and I performed the scene, which again is a mechanical performance. We show the actors only the mechanics of the scene, we do not dwell on the layers and emotions of the scene at that time. While the actors are observing us, naturally even the cinematographer and the art director are watching us. Therefore, all the key departments, including lighting, get a sense of the angle of exposure, depth of field, etc. Then I make the actors rehearse the scene, again without getting into the scene's layers and emotions. Sometimes, actors have suggestions on how they would enact a particular scene, and if I like their suggestion I tweak the mechanics of the scene to include their ideas. Once my director of photography (DOP) and I are satisfied with the mechanics of the scene, I finalize the placement of the camera and the lens.

What are the various jobs you did in the twelve years between graduation and your first film?

AB: My first real experience with films was as an actor in Dalaal, then as a background dancer, then as a third assistant cinematographer as focus puller, then as an assistant to a make-up artist/director, and finally as an assistant director on TV shows. After that I became an independent TV director with Tara.

My advice to younger

people is, do not waste time and talent waiting for big opportunities. Grab whatever comes your way!

My advice to younger people is, do not waste time and talent waiting for big opportunities. Grab whatever comes your way! I did whatever jobs I could get, or that came my way. You can never know from which door destiny will knock. Many young actors and directors keep waiting for a break in films, and let go of golden opportunities to work in TV, not realizing that TV experience can help them achieve their film dream.

You should breathe and eat on film, theatre or TV floors, do jobs related to them, rather than sitting at home where no one will know you nor your talent. It is my conviction that our film industry is a fair playground. It treats everyone equally, where talent is concerned, whatever be their background or skill levels. If you really want to work, you will not sit at home a single day; work will find you.

Do you create storyboards, illustrations, to convey your expressions to the technicians?

AB: I approach the process in a different way. After my script is ready, when I am narrating the script to my cinematographer or art director, I begin to see the colours, and the colour palette of the entire film. I convey those colours and all that I see to them during my narration. I do not create any storyboards as such, but I think it is good to make them. Sometimes, the director is unable to convey adequately what is in his mind, and a crew may not understand the director correctly. Storyboarding helps convey your ideas to others with no loss in translation.

For me, visualization is more important than storyboarding. If I storyboard, I feel I will lose the inherent spontaneity and energy that is present in the writing. Therefore, I usually draw just the basic floor plan, and nothing more. I believe in spontaneity and improvisation so much that I do not even script some scenes completely before going on the set.

In Barfi, one actor is mute and deaf, the other is mentally challenged; did you do script rehearsals with them to get their body language right?

AB: Barfi was improvised mostly on the set or location. Ranbir got into the mood and groove of his character in the very first schedule; it was the kidnapping scene, where he kidnaps Priyanka.

Before the shoot, we did some script rehearsals with Priyanka and we got the character of Jhil Mil correct. I even showed Priyanka many reference materials of autistic children, and made her meet some

special children too. I took her to a special school, Sanskardham Vidyalaya for the Hearing Impaired (SVHI), located at Goregaon. We interacted casually with the special children, not for her to copy their physicality and body language, but to understand their mind. I knew if she could get into their mind, her body would naturally follow.

I did not tell her about what happens in the script before the scene which she was about to perform or what was going to happen in the scene that comes after. (*Laughs*) Naturally, she complained to me that she was totally blank about her character so how can she do justice to her role. I told her, 'It is good you are blank about everything, because Jhilmil is blank too, about what is going on in her mind, her life! So I do not want you, as the actor, to have that knowledge. I do not want you to carry any baggage of information about who you are and where you are headed in this drama, and that is why I am going to keep you in the dark until the last scene you shoot for this film!' She is an intelligent actor. She agreed.

I was lucky I had two talented actors who trusted me blindly and did whatever I asked, because that made me feel even more responsible towards them. So I worked even harder, because now I had a far bigger responsibility to not let them down in any manner whatsoever.

Any more tips about creating the crucial trust factor between actor and director?

AB: In theatre, we would have a workshop on the first day of rehearsals, where we would tell the actors to stand at a height and throw themselves off the perch without worrying about where they would land. They knew other actors were standing below to catch them before they hit the ground.

When I began working with Priyanka on Barfi, on the very first day of our script rehearsals, I realized there was an impregnable wall of respect between us. She would address me as 'sir', and I felt our relationship is going to fail unless I broke ice with her. I am not talking about the actor and director being friendly, but about both of us feeling uninhibited. I told Priyanka to hold my shirt collar and abuse me, to give me the choicest and filthiest of abuses she can think of. She refused. I understood her inhibition and I told all my assistants to leave the room and then told her to abuse me. She threw at me the filthiest and choicest ones. (*Laughs*) After that she was the most uninhibited, open person around me, questioning me comfortably on my choices. And that did the magic, I think. I can say we had a lot of fun shooting *Barfi*. It's important, because the vibe of the set will permeate into the film.

What are actors really looking for in a new director?
AB: Being a director, I am attracted by a script that will allow me to flex my directorial skills, enable me to express emotion and skills that I have not attempted before. Same for actors; they like scripts that will bring out the talent they think they have, or make them do something they have not attempted ever before. When they hear stories or read scripts, if they are able to visualize their character clearly, they say yes to your script immediately.

What is your process of casting an actor, how do you audition actors?
AB: Everybody has a unique personality. I seek actors who are naturally close to the characters that I need to cast. If my character has a humorous side and the actor has a similar trait, I will cast him or her easily. Because it is very tough for an actor to change completely for a role, and if he does then it will come across as fake on screen; then the audience will not see the character but only an actor trying to 'act'. So, I first seek an actor who comes very close to the traits I have written in my character, the manner in which he looks and speaks, etc. Once I find someone close to my character, I never audition that actor.

What I usually do is, I have a lengthy talk with the person I am interested in casting; I meet that person two or three times to understand that person better. And during our general conversation I pick up on how he or she talks in real life, what he or she has gone through in life, because these things will never be mentioned on their CV, but will reflect in their personality if they open up to you. You can only know these important but discreet things by generally speaking to the actors you are interested in working with.

Only when you have the actor's trust will they surrender their talent to your creative decisions, and hand themselves to you completely. Then I can mould them and bring them even closer to the character I created in my mind.

I even go to the extent of making myself vulnerable; I share personal secrets with some of my actors to create a natural trust. Because the second step in the process of building an actor– director relationship, or even a writer–director relationship, is to make them trust you completely.

Only when you have the actor's trust will they surrender their talent to your creative decisions, and hand themselves to you completely. Then I can mould them and bring them even closer to the

character I created in my mind.

For example, I met a new actor for *Barfi*. We had a very long chat, but she was not opening up emotionally. I began asking her some personal questions and gradually she started to connect with me emotionally. To my surprise, soon she began to cry while speaking about her life. That is when I saw something in her that I had seen in my character, and told her she would play the role of the heroine of my film. She asked me, 'But you did not even audition me?' I said, 'Believe me, your audition was just done! The last few hours we chatted, honestly, that was good enough for me to know whether you can play the character I have in mind.' Her name is Ileana. I believe that making actors audition for roles does not serve any purpose.

I cast Kangana Ranaut in *Gangster* in a similar manner, without any audition. I just chatted with her and soon I knew she could play the character in *Gangster* very well; and she did. It was her debut film and her performance was appreciated.

Who was the editor of Saaya? What was your process of working with him?

AB: Aqeeb Ali was the editor. He was an assistant editor when I became a director. In fact, my first film as a director was a first film for many: my editor, my art director, and my cinematographer. While editing, I would line up each and every shot for the scene from the beginning. I would not allow my editor to line up the shots or assemble the scene. (*Laughs*) I was so obsessed about having complete control of the edit that I even began changing my shooting style to control exactly which shots can be edited. So I would edit while shooting, by minimizing the shot-list and not shooting coverage and extra set-ups. (*Laughs*) Saaya was very precise by way of budget too, so I would do this kind of 'in-film' edit while shooting which also saves time and money for production by not shooting unnecessary coverage.

It is only after *Murder* I realized that by doing in-film editing, I was not keeping the necessary margin that a director might need for any rewriting while editing. With no extra shorts, no coverage to play with while editing, I, and even my editor, was left with no option but to edit the scene only in the manner I had shot it; that drastically limited my choices during edit. So now, I take extra shots, I shoot coverage, to be able to have more options for myself while editing. And now I also allow my editor to line up the shots for me. (*Smiles*)

After working together on so many films, Aqeeb now knows my shooting style very well, so even if I do not sound the clap in some shots, he knows where those shots eventually belong in the scene, so he can line them up without any input from me or my editing-

assistant. That is also another reason I usually work with the same set of technicians in most of my films.

You said you had not assisted any film director, what were the advantages?
AB: After Vishesh Films signed me for Saaya, my producer Mukesh Bhatt asked me what would be the budget of the film. I told him I would prepare the tentative budget within a day. With my common sense and experience from producing and directing so many TV serials, I prepared a tentative budget for *Saaya*. And I came up with a budget of about Rs 2.5 crores within two days. Before I presented the budget, I feared that if I mentioned the budget as Rs 2.5 crores, I might not get to direct the film, as it seemed too expensive for a first-time director. But I asked for Rs 2.5 crores anyway, not realizing it was very low for the standard films of that genre. Mukesh-ji did not even blink when I told him I calculated the budget at 2.5 crores. (*Laughs*) I found out only later that he was very pleased that I could manage the film in such an affordable budget!

Even today, Mukesh-ji and Bhatt Saab give me credit that I brought about a drastic change in the budgeting style at Vishesh Films. (*Smiles*) Earlier, they used to make similar films in 7 to 8 crores. It is from my first two films with them, *Saaya* and *Murder*, that Vishesh Films mastered the art of budgeting a film without losing out or compromising on its production value.

So, not being from the film industry, and not having knowledge of how feature films are budgeted, worked to my advantage. Those two films would probably have cost double that amount had any other first-time director arriving from the film business prepared their budgets.

Is direction a physically and mentally exhausting profession?
AB: In your house, if ten or more people keep asking you questions through the day, wanting you to make decisions, which only you can and should make, it can get quite frustrating and very tiring after a while. (*Laughs*) Whereas for a director, the questioning goes on through the entire shoot over weeks and months of pre-production and production! And they do not end there. The relentless questions begin once again during post-production. Having to be so attentive, having to reply to everyone's questions, having to be everyone's friend, brother, mother or psychoanalyst, is draining.

Direction is also risky, beyond just being exhausting or challenging, because a lot of money and so many people's careers ride on your decisions. Sometimes I think that being a director is like being a dog crossing a hectic expressway; any decision it makes, in the

beginning, middle, or any time during his journey across that terribly busy road, can prove fatal for it. Any speeding car or truck can crush it, and yet somehow the vulnerable but persistent dog manages to make it across safely. Sometimes with its tail between its legs.

In that sense, the weather, rain, a bad actor, an incompetent producer or technician, death of someone important, even riots or a bandh, anybody, anything, even your own decisions, can jack up the budget, stall the schedule or even the film altogether.

Is it true that a director has to handle ego issues from his cast and crew? How do you deal with it?

AB: I have faced issues like tantrums and bad egos. I just can't tackle them, and that is my weakness. I just throw it, their attitude, ego, back at them! (*Laughs*)

Once, an actor complained to me that the production did not receive her from the airport in a Mercedes Benz, but they did that for another actor in the film. I lost it! I told her, 'I would have been happy had you come to me to discuss and know more about the schedule, or your scenes. I would not have minded even if you had come to me to complain about how badly your scene is written or if some dialogue or whatever else in your scene is not making any sense to you. But here you are complaining about the brand and status of the car my producer sent to collect you from the airport. How in hell will that help your performance as an actor?' I told her to leave the set and return to the hotel. I refused to shoot with her until she changed her approach to her work.

I believe when the director is down to earth, the unit behaves like a family. You do not want somebody with tantrums and ego to derail your mood, imbalance the environment of the shoot. Ego tantrums disturb the mood of the day and thus the work at hand. In any case, the film industry will discard such negative people eventually, because here word gets around very fast.

As for people with creative ego – which I consider good ego, which many talented people have, and which comes from their high level of conviction in their own work – I do not consider their suggestions, or even their stubbornness in convincing you of what they believe in, as ego. Any good artist, technician, poet, any creative person will harbour such ego, it is only natural. The good director, being an artist himself, recognizes, understands and respects such beings.

I will say, beware of any person who agrees with everything you suggest, or disagrees with everything; both are bad for you and your film.

Everyone has an ego,
good or bad. You have to

have the skill to understand its source to tackle it effectively. Talent and passion are rare here, and this profession is also about balancing each other's egos.

There is a quote by writer–actor–director Daryl F. Zanuck: 'If two people on a job agree all the time, then one is useless. If they disagree all the time, then both are useless.' Everyone has an ego, good or bad. You have to have the skill to understand its source to tackle it effectively. Talent and passion are rare here, and this profession is also about balancing each other's egos.

When you direct, do you like to be next to the camera or the video-assist monitor?
AB: If my actors are not performing very far from the camera, I stand next to the actor and camera to watch them. If the camera is far from the action, I view the action from the video-assist monitor. Honestly, the best position to watch the action is from the viewfinder of the camera, and I do that most of the time. I do not work with a cinematographer who will not understand my need to view the action from the viewfinder when I need to. If not the final take, I must view at least the rehearsal through the viewfinder. Now if the ego of the cinematographer will not permit me to do this, I will choose not to work with him or her. The advantage of viewing the action from the viewfinder is that I get to view exactly what the audience is going to view on the cinema screen.

When your child grows up, and if he or she comes up to you and says he or she wants to be a film-maker, what advice will you offer?
AB: I want my daughter to be a film-maker. I am certain she will be a good storyteller; even at such a young age now, she writes and creates stories, and stories that I like. (*Smiles*) I will be more than happy if she wants to be a film-maker. However, I will not give her any exact advice. I would probably simply tell her, 'I would rather be known as your father, than you be known as my daughter'; that, I think, will be enough for her to find her own path to her own dream. (*Smiles*)

Would you like to say something, share something from your experiences with today's generation?
AB: What comes to my mind immediately, which even I follow, will sound like a cliché; however, they say in film-making that 'clichés work'. (*Smiles*) 'Believe in yourself' is an absolute cliché, but believe me, it works. Always. For those who want to be good film-makers I

would advise: ‘Inhale life to exhale cinema.’

Another thing I can add. When someone comes up to me and tells me, ‘I am your fan’, I tell them not to be my fan, or anyone else’s. Because, I believe, a fan cannot have any follower. I would also say, do not run after anyone, and do not make anyone run after you. Most importantly, don’t earn money; earn people. The day you earn people, those who want to be with you, stand by you, you will earn money too. Only through your good work can you achieve this.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Ravi Varman Speaks on Anurag Basu

A cinematographer reflects a director’s emotions through light. I think, a cinematographer’s well of emotions runs deeper than that of a director. In the sense, a director narrates the events of a story, but a cinematographer interprets those events through the use of the correct light for that emotion. Because it is the cinematographer who decides what light the character will laugh in, what light someone will fall in love in, fall out of love in, cry in, dream in, run in, walk in, sit in, sing a song and dance in, etc. We first visualize the kind of light apt for the emotion to be conveyed, only after that we think about the lens. People say, words speak, music speaks, paintings speak; I think, ‘Light speaks. And speaks a hell of a lot! You just need the eyes to hear it.’ A good director helps a cinematographer see the light in his mind. Anurag helps me see the light in my mind when he talks about his story, situation, characters and screenplay. That is why I like to work with him.

The first time I read the story of *Barfi*, I knew that I would be involved in something of great value. Two great films of this kind I had seen came to my mind, *Koshish* (1972), for its emotional quotient, and *The Artist* (2011), for its tonality. They were films with hardly any dialogues, therefore they had to be treated visually. I felt I had a challenging and different film this time, because you can count on your one hand the number of such films made so far. So the project was very special for me as well, because we rarely get an opportunity to convey dialogues and emotions in a film by the means of light alone. I felt blessed that Anurag offered me this rare opportunity. During the very first schedule he told me he wanted me to shoot the film like an international film, and I could do what I want, he would support me on my ideas. He said such films were made once in a lifetime and so he wanted me to give him more than my best, and that I had the freedom to interpret his vision.

When I wake up and go about my day, I notice that the sunlight is on my face. When I reach the studio, it is on my head, or my back.

The direction of sunlight keeps changing. I thought that for this film we should not change the direction of the light source, we will change our direction. Wherever we set the frame we would capture the light in the way it appears, sometimes back, sometimes front, sometimes on top of us. But the director has to also see my belief or perspective of his vision. If he does not, I will do it the way he suggests. However, after I set up the lighting the way I interpreted Anurag's vision, he immediately agreed to the lighting mood. He realized it, without me having to express it, that I did not want something beautiful for this film; I wanted something wonderful, unique and special. That helped me deliver for his film. He has the ability to sense what is correct immediately, and I think that is because he himself has a good sense of cinematography. He has been a cameraman, writer and director of TV serials. It helps me gel with him, knowing that he understands the camera like I do.

Anurag has great knowledge of camera lens. I believe that people who know their job never interfere in the job of others. Anurag is one who never interferes. He can express what he wants from the narrative so well that I can understand how to convey it through light and camera.

He rarely appreciates my work openly while we are working; the most he says to me is 'Okay Ravi'. He will never use adjectives like good or very good. He is a man of few words. It is during the lunch break or any other break that he will come up to me and say, 'Ravi, good work, I'm impressed.'

We shot *Barfi* for around 120 to 140 days, and not a single day did we have any issues or differences in opinion. He would treat me as well as he treats the stars and the light men and spot boys. All are equal for him, he treats people with dignity and affection. He even cooks and feeds everyone.

Working with Anurag was a celebration of our minds, our hearts and of the film. That is why I could do such good work, the actors and other crew could do good work, and even he could make such a good film. When the captain of the ship is good, the crew shines, the ship sails to wonderful shores.

Anurag's knowledge of camera, his skill and talent in telling a story, his talent as a screenplay writer, his ability to express himself, his simplicity, his dignity towards one and all, his respect for his technicians, crew and unit, make me long to return to him for yet another film.

ASHUTOSH GOWARIKER

'To me, film-making is a search for the indefinite, the unknown – as a director you are only trying to unravel the script, then the actors, then the performances and so on and so forth, continually, at every stage of the film-making process.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Pehla Nasha (1993), *Baazi* (1995), *Lagaan* (2001), *Swades* (2004), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), *What's Your Raashee?* (2009), *Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Sey* (2010)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Bandra West, Mumbai; acted in plays during college years; cast as main lead actor in *Holi* (1983), during second year in college; attended Film Appreciation course at FTII (Film and Television Institute of India), Pune, in 1990; did a still photography course; assisted various directors while working as an actor in TV shows and films; directed his first film *Pehla Nasha* (1993); it took him ten years from his first film as an actor to his first film as a director.

MY TAKE

I remember Ashutosh from my school, St. Theresa High School, Bandra, Mumbai. He was my senior. I do not have a clear memory of him during my school years; however, I faintly recollect he had something to do with acting. I was not aware of theatre and the performing arts then.

Years later, I remember him coming to my house to meet my father, but I have no recollection of the nature of his visit except that he was making a film. I did not know if he was a producer or a director. I was shy and would run away to my room after opening the door for the film people who came home daily to work with my father. My father wrote the lyrics for his film; that is all I knew.

I must mention here, I had really liked him in the character role of an enthusiastic and good-hearted taxi driver in Mahesh Bhatt's *Naam* (1986). I also remember him from some other films he acted in: *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989), *Gawaahi* (1989), *Chamatkar* (1992), *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* (1993).

Thereafter, my memory is of seeing him regularly at the most popular cinema halls in the suburbs: Gaiety, Galaxy, Gemini. We were not friends, although we knew each other, and I think we shared a handshake or a hello from a distance over two decades. I was not a part of the film profession until 1999, by which time he had made two films, both of which had failed at the box office.

By the time I saw *Lagaan*, I had already worked as an assistant director with Subhash Ghai on his film *Taal*, and had written the story and screenplay of a couple of episodes of a TV show. So I had some knowledge about the process of writing and cinema. Therefore, while watching *Lagaan*, I said to myself, 'Oh my God! What a film! What script! What casting! What performances! Oh, this is the same fellow who made *Pehla Nasha*, and he was in my school. I wish I could have worked with him on this amazing film. I wish I had known him when he would come home to meet Dad for his film's lyrics.'

The next time I met Ashutosh was to work for him in some capacity, sometime after *Swades*, I think. After our meeting he accompanied me to the street outside his office to see me off. My father was no more then and I thought to myself, 'This man has shown immense respect to Dad by seeing me off. God bless him.'

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Where were you born? What sort of neighbourhood did you grow up in?*
Ashutosh Gowariker (AG): I was born in Mumbai, at Girgaum, near my mother's maternal home. My father was a police officer, and we were living in government quarters, in the western suburb of Bandra. We were Maharashtrians, Gujaratis, Sindhis, Bengalis – Hindus, Muslims, Catholics – all living in the same neighbourhood. My parents were lovers of art and literature. We regularly saw Marathi plays, and my parents loved cinema; so we were taken for a movie every week.

What was your childhood dream?
AG: I had no specific dream or ambition.

What career did your parents want you to have? When and how did you discover your passion and love for films, the actor/director in you?
AG: Acting as my choice of vocation was an accident. When I was in the second year at Mithibai College, I had ambitions of pursuing architecture. Then disaster struck. I scored only 52 per cent marks in my board exams, (*laughs*) which meant my chances for admission in an architecture college were slim. My parents were dejected. Much to the frustration of my parents, I was forced to take admissions in BSc in the same college.

I entered the college premises feeling dejected and apprehensive about what my future held. That's when I noticed several noticeboards all around, announcing various auditions to be held for theatre, folk dance, group singing, elocution contests, and what have you. I decided to give auditions everywhere. Much to my surprise, I got chosen in each of the activities. And then something inside me said that I was on the right path. I followed this inner voice within me, and in the first year itself, I participated in Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and English plays, and even performed in folk dances, elocutions, group singing and solo singing. That was a turning point in my life as it gave me an opportunity to discover myself and cultivate a new vocation for myself.

Those three years just flew by acting in college plays, and I realized that I loved acting, I loved being on stage! (*Smiles*) I experienced a certain power on stage, being someone else.

It was in one of the plays performed during an intercollegiate contest that Ketan Mehta noticed me, and he offered me a part in his forthcoming film *Holi* (1983). By the time I returned from the shooting schedule of *Holi* in Pune, I had tasted blood (*laughs*) and had decided on acting as my career choice. Thus began my acting career.

I remember struggling a lot with acting because – and I realized this only in retrospect – I did not have a good idea about the technique and craft of acting. I was constantly struggling to discover myself and survive as an actor. Having said that, even today, I am still discovering myself as a director, a film-maker. To me, film-making is a search for the indefinite, the unknown – as a director you are only trying to unravel the script, then the actors, then the performances and so on and so forth, continually, at every stage of the film-making process.

How and when did you make the transition from acting to direction?
AG: From 1986 to 1992, I did fifty projects as an actor, which included both TV and films. During this time, an interest for direction began to develop in me. I liked the job profile of the director who tells a story with the help of a diverse team of professionals like cinematographer, art director, composer and so on.

And so, along the way, I began to unofficially assist some of the directors I was working with as an actor. I would spend time with them, even try and offer some inputs, when I was not required in the schedule or a scene, of course, without coming in their way or offending them in any manner. Those seven years as an actor laid the foundation of my understanding about what really goes behind the art of film-making: what is character, how to get actors to align with the character, how it is important for every crew member to share the

vision of the director, and countless other lessons.

By then I had realized I'd never reach the zenith in the profession of acting. But at the same time, I knew I wanted to remain in this field. And the only other field that excited me was directing. The option of going to film school was not available to me at the time and hence I decided to go for the course in film appreciation, but armed with my on-the-field experience in acting.

So I did the eight-week film appreciation course at the FTII, Pune, and that was a mind opener, with the introduction to world cinema as well as Indian cinema. In hindsight, that was a landmark moment in my life that helped me concretize, reaffirm my decision to be a film director. However, I would advise any individual to go through a two or three-year film-making course.

During this time, some of my co-actors, Aamir (Khan), Deepak (Tijori) and Shah Rukh (Khan) knew that I had an affinity for direction and they somehow had the confidence in me. They'd often say to me, 'You should direct a film, you have it in you.' And when opportunity came my way I took it – with Deepak it was *Pehla Nasha*, and with Aamir it was *Baazi*. Thus began my directorial career, which too was purely accidental! (*Smiles*)

What made directing more appealing to you than acting?
AG: Even while I was acting, I realized I would get greater satisfaction if I were narrating the story, which is what a director really does with film images. Somewhere, I wanted to achieve that, to be a storyteller, and only as a director could I have achieved that.

Did you apply your learnings from acting to direction? How?
AG: Those years as an actor laid the foundation of my understanding about what goes behind film-making, what is characterization, why actors are important to a movie, how to get performance from them, how they can be directed. As an actor, when I tried to get more information from my director about things that were going to help my performance, like say, if I posed a question, 'What is the motivation for my character?', some directors would rebuke me saying, 'Just do your job as an actor; don't question anything!' But the actor needs to be in the right frame of mind to deliver an emotionally correct performance. The actor can be in the right frame of mind when he or she is aware of what is happening in the script and why. He can know this only if the director shares everything the actor needs to know to help him bring the right performance out of him.

Therefore, when I am making a film, I spend a lot of time during scripting to learn everything I can about the script. I give a lot of importance to script readings with actors, because that helps me fine-

tune the script, often with the help of their comments and suggestions. In addition, I apply the same process to my dealings with all the creative departments, be it the director of photography (DOP), the production designer, or any other crew and talent.

Ambiguity in directors is a hard thing to deal with, especially for actors.

If a director does not find his own method of arriving at answers, the technicians or talent, especially actors, may not be able to offer him their best. Ambiguity in directors is a hard thing to deal with, especially for actors.

Who was your first producer, how did you meet him?

AG: My first producer was my friend, Deepak Tijori. Deepak was a partner not in terms of finance, but rather sweat equity; sweat equity often goes unnoticed in our business. It is Deepak's efforts that put my first film project together. He was the energy behind the project's birth and evolution.

The hands-on producers and financiers were Mohammed A. Rahim and Dr Viral Shah. They had formed a film production company called Ahlan Productions. Deepak introduced me to them and we shared the story idea of *Pehla Nasha* with them. Writer Neeraj Vora and I had developed the story; they liked the story and decided to back me as a director and then I began writing the script.

People spend a lot of years waiting to get their first film in place. What would you advise them?

Whatever your talent or craft, you must first create reference material for anyone to judge your talent. After that, it is only persistence and patience that take you through. Of all the important ingredients in making a good director, the key element is patience. A director must have a deep reservoir of patience.

AG: If you want to be a director, you must first have a story, then you must write a script or get it written, whatever works best for you. Like, if you were a composer, you would first compose your sample

songs for anyone to hear, by which they can judge your talent. Whatever your talent or craft, you must first create reference material for anyone to judge your talent. After that, it is only persistence and patience that take you through. Of all the important ingredients in making a good director, the key element is patience. A director must have a deep reservoir of patience.

Why does an actor really need a director? You were an actor, so how has it helped you when you became a director?
AG: The director can help the actor achieve the right degree of performance throughout the script's graph. The director can lead the actor only if he or she has sufficient knowledge about acting, and it does not matter if the director is not a professional actor.

If the director is an actor too, or knows something about the craft of acting, or has learnt certain methods and techniques to understand actors from the point of view of a director, it helps. In such a scenario, if his actor is stuck during performance, the director will be better equipped to understand what is hindering his actor. The director will be able to discern whether a word in the dialogue is a tongue-twister. Is the wardrobe uncomfortable, is it causing irritation? Has the actor suffered something emotional before arriving to work? Is there a lack of camaraderie between the actors? In my case, I am able to understand these issues better, because of my own experience as an actor, and thus I can help an actor solve it.

When an actor arrives on the set, I ask him or her, always in complete privacy, of course, 'Are you happy with your wardrobe, happy with your lines; are you feeling stuck anywhere in the dialogue; have you rehearsed your lines with your co-actor?', etc. I do this with every actor, because it is never about hierarchy; all actors deserve equal empathy, understanding, from their director. Empathy is the correct word to understand an actor's emotional space. I am sure every director has his own methodology of cracking the code of how to direct his or her actors best.

You had mentioned there are workshops abroad on 'How to Direct Actors'. Well, I suggest there should be one to help actors too, and the concept should be, 'How to receive direction from directors.' That is another skill that actors could use.

How do you audition actors?
AG: I have two stages for the casting process. I first conduct an audition and then a screen test. When I do an audition, I expect the actor to perform any scene of his or her choice. If I like that, I make him or her perform a scene from the film for which I am auditioning. I review the audition later and if the actor shows promise, I call him

back for the second stage in the process, the screen test.

In the screen test, I put the actor in make-up and wardrobe of my character and then I explain to him what exactly I am looking for in his character's portrayal – explain the scene's crux, the spine, to the actor. Then, a camera records the actor's performance. If the actor passes this screen test, he or she is on for the film; it is celebration time! (*Smiles*)

Getting a first break is most challenging. What advice can you offer someone who is facing rejection as a first-time director?
AG: Faith and knowledge are already taken care of when you have a script or a diploma in film-making. Above that, you need persistence, and the understanding that even if a producer or an actor has said 'no' to you, he or she has not rejected your talent. What they are really conveying to you is that they have nothing to offer you, you do not fit in their scheme of things. You need to keep faith in yourself, and move on to the next producer or actor you need for your project to happen.

In the history of cinema, you will learn that many successful projects have travelled several hands before they settled with the producer or actor who felt it suits his needs. But you have to cap your conviction to an extent; you cannot keep it open forever. What I mean is, if you have a script and if you have heard, say ten rejections, after each 'no' you should analyse why that rejection happened. By the time you analyse the tenth rejection you received, you may find there is a commonality in all the ten. And if that is indeed true, then write another script. Time is essential in this profession, so you cannot keep on flogging one script forever.

You said, 'After ten rejections you need to look for commonalities.' Please elaborate.
AG: Rejection does not necessarily have to be external. It can also be from within. It can even arrive to me before I pitch it to producers. I might write something and reject it myself after a while, after much introspection. Because when I write a script, I believe in narrating it to maximum number of people, who I believe are my well-wishers and who will be able to tell me on my face what works for them and what does not. That is the kind of approval, and disapproval, I am talking about.

Why do you think having a background in literature is a benefit when it comes to directing?
AG: When you are making movies, you are telling stories, and even literature does that; just that literature uses words. In films you are

using a variety of media: words, film images, and audio. However, the take-off point for both forms of storytelling remains words. For a director, knowing the print form of storytelling, writing with words, becomes very important, because he or she is going to create in words what he or she will later write using film images. A writer writes with words, whereas a director writes with film images. If you understand the world of literature, it will help you as a director.

Would I give the same importance to cinematography? No, I would not. Do I need to understand images? No, I do not. Camera is something I do not need to learn because I can hire a professional cinematographer who knows his art and craft, and I can brief him on how I see the images and he or she can create them for me. However, do I need to understand stories? Yes, I need to, and only literature can give me a deeper understanding of them.

To make a good film I need to tell a story with the help of cameras, costumes, art direction, acting, etc. As a director, I first need to know what comprises a good story. I should be able to write a good story, or get one written. If I know literature better, it can help me make better choices during the writing process. When you dive deep into the world of literature, you learn the different kinds of stories written over the ages, and even those created in the present. I did not have a good knowledge of literature when I started as an actor and later as a director. It was only after I made my first film that I became aware of the world of literature. I began reading. I started reading short stories, novels, fiction of Marathi literature, and then moved on to Hindi and English. I have read quite a wide range now, and yet I have a lot to catch up on, so colossal is the world of literature!

Should all directors know how to write, even if it is just one scene?
AG: Not necessarily. They should have an idea of what they want to convey. If they do not know what they want to say, it can be problematic during the writing process and in extracting performance from an actor. If I want to comment on the political state of affairs in the country, or say something about democracy, and do not have a story to use as a vehicle to convey my angst, my thoughts, I should look for a writer who has written something on similar lines. I do not necessarily have to be a writer to convey my thoughts. Hitchcock did not write a single story of any film that he directed; yet he is a legend.

Whether it's drama, tragedy, comedy, action or melodrama, or sci-fi, it has to be something you want to tell. How you tell it, the way you tell it, is what distinguishes your

work from others. A director searches for the most effective way to tell a story.

All were books that he adapted as screenplays. He loved his genre and he perfected it, but continued to make films based on stories not written by him.

Whether it's drama, tragedy, comedy, action or melodrama, or sci-fi, it has to be something you want to tell. How you tell it, the way you tell it, is what distinguishes your work from others. A director searches for the most effective way to tell a story.

Did you create storyboards for your first film or films?
AG: No. They were not required for a simple drama like Pehla Nasha. For me, storyboarding is more of a VFX exercise, like, when I need to execute special visual effects, or action; when I need to know the exact frame, distance of the subject from camera, and many other parameters; and other departments also need to know simultaneously how that frame is going to look before it is shot.

Who was your cinematographer for Pehla Nasha, and how did you select him?
AG: I had thought of a certain shooting style for the film. I wanted a kind of gliding movement through the film. The Steadicam had newly arrived then. I concluded that if my film is going to have 60 per cent hand-held camera, I must hire a Steadicam operator for the camerawork. I hired Deep Pal, and he in turn roped in Shankar Bardhan-ji, to help him with complex lighting set-ups.

When you arrive on the set, or location, how do you progress with actors?
AG: First, I set the mise en scène. I rehearse it with my assistants, and then show the actors our raw rehearsal. The actors then take their positions and rehearse the scene mechanically. That way, everyone, including the cinematographer and even the art director, views how the scene is going to play out in the space. The camera is secondary to the actors' placement and movements, their position and movement decides the placement of the former.

Your first day of shoot, how did it go? What did you choose to shoot on the first day?
AG: My first day was smooth, except for a couple of unpredictable showers of rain. We fell behind in the number of shots we had planned to cover, but then we compensated the next day. I always shoot the first scene of the script on my first shooting day, on all my films, for orientation. From the second day, I jump to any scene that

suits our production needs. For the first day's shoot on any of my films, it does not matter whether the main actor from my film is in the first scene or not. I will shoot the first scene in the script on the first day.

Whether you are making your first film, or tenth film, problems arrive every day?
AG: Cinema being a collaborative art is also a collaboration of problems. (*Smiles*) Every individual who is going to collaborate in the film may come across some problems while executing his job.

Cinema being a collaborative art is also a collaboration of problems.

That is where good administration skills come in handy.

Every film has an invisible code of how much time it needs for preparation, pre-production, to shoot that film. If you are making a film that is set in a building, and the story takes place over one night, you realize you are going to shoot across twelve days for the film. Your pre-production for the movie can be one month before you actually start shooting.

For *Jodhaa Akbar* I decided to have a pre-production for one and a half-year. When we travelled to the location in Jaipur with a crew of 300 people, everything we needed was already in place, including elephants and equipment, ready to shoot the very next day. We did not encounter any problems during the next few months of production in spite of colossal production needs of a period film with battle and war scenes, and animals like elephants.

Is it important to take your producer into confidence for every act, even if it's purely a direction issue?
AG: The producer–director relationship is not very different from that of a child with his or her father. Let us recollect, during our childhood, when we would ask our father, or our mother sometimes, for money to buy something and he gave it to us. If we spent fifty from the hundred rupees he gave us, and returned the balance to him, explaining why we are returning the balance, we won his trust. And because we now have his trust, in the future if we ever happened to spend more than the hundred rupees he gave us, explaining to him where and why we spent the additional fifty, our father would not mind it. That is the same way a director can build trust with his or her producer too.

What else helped you as a first-time director, beyond technical skills?

AG: Patience allows things to happen the way they naturally should. As a director, once you have set up everything, you have to be patient, not just with yourself, but also with your cinematographer who is lighting up your shot, with your actor who is getting ready with the lines, with your production or direction team who are working to meet your requirements.

Technicians are there to deliver, but it is your patience that allows them to evolve to your level, your plane, your vision.

All of them are looking up to you to motivate them, day after day, hour after hour, sometimes under difficult physical and emotional circumstances.

Technicians are there to deliver, but it is your patience that allows them to evolve to your level, your plane, your vision.

As a first-time director, what was your experience working with someone far more experienced, say, with your lyrics writer, Anand Bakshi?
AG: One of the most memorable experiences of *Pehla Nasha* was working with Anand Bakshi Saab! We, my music composers Neeraj and Uttank Vora, and myself, would go to his house in the afternoons, for sessions on the lyrics our film required. The first situation we worked on was the song *'Mr Zero bann gaya hero'*.

I remember that I was terribly nervous and excited! Nervous, because I was going to work with Bakshi Saab. Excited, since this was the first time that I was working on the creation of a song. I have loved music from childhood. Though the melody always registered with me quicker than the lyrics. So even if I did not remember the lyrics of a song, I could hum the melody.

And here I was, sitting in front of Bakshi Saab, with no experience of how the process works, since I had not assisted any director at this level. I had worked on sets, but I had never attended a music session with those directors. My only comfort level was with Neeraj and Uttank because they were both my college buddies, and we had spent enough time together during music competitions and talent contests in college. And as far as Rahim, our producer, was concerned, he was the one who had made this meeting happen. He was the one who had convinced Bakshi Saab to work with three tender-footed beginners. (*Smiles*)

I narrated the story and explained the situation to Bakshi Saab. He found the situation interesting – a struggling actor getting his first role as a hero in a movie. Interestingly, the situation was applicable to all four of us sitting in front of him. Probably, that is the reason he liked

it. He must have been amused, I think. (*Laughs*)

He wrote the mukhda that day itself, within an hour or so: *'Mr Zero bann gaya hero, ho gaya chamatkaar … Yaaron … main bann gaya film star!'* The next day, he wrote the most fabulous verse of the entire movie that is applicable to all who are connected with any creative field:

Din gaye gumnaamiyon ke,
Aaye din badnaamiyon ke,
Logon ki zubaan pe, mera naam hoga,
Meri har adaa pe, ik salaam hoga,
Aisa hoga mujhko toh nahi hai aitbaar…
Mr Zero bann gaya hero, ho gaya chamatkaar…

These were really great moments from our point of view! I am not sure from his point of view. (*Smiles*) Then we worked on *'Aaj raat bass mein nahin dil'*, and slowly but surely our relationship grew.

A couple of times he got upset with me because I asked questions about a particular word, particular phrase that he had written for one of the songs. But I remember not getting perturbed by the firing I got! (*Laughs*) I was quick on the uptake. (*Smiles*) I would never repeat that mistake in the next song. However, I committed new ones. (*Laughs*) There were six songs in the film!

One day, I was explaining the new situation to him of a song in the film: *'Tu hai haseena main hoon deewana'*. I had to hum the tune to him. I think he was impressed the way I sang it. And that day, the ice broke! I think he took a certain degree of fondness for us from that moment onward, (*smiles*) because the very next day after we packed up and were about to leave, he asked us to stay back a while. And then he recited to us the entire lyrics of *'Chingari koi bhadke'!* His song from *Amar Prem* (1971). He recited the entire poetry! That was amazing! Anand Bakshi himself reciting to us was an unforgettable moment! He did not have to! Yet he did! Maybe it was his way of opening up, exposing his core.

Honestly, I discovered him much more after having worked with him on *Pehla Nasha*. I rediscovered the countless gems that he wrote in the 1970s. Today, I really think of him as a poetic genius. He is a master! A dada! (*Smiles*)

I feel very fortunate to have worked with him, with such a great poet and lyricist in my very first film! It was generous of him to accept the movie with us rank newcomers – first-time composers, producer, actor and director. I must say we are indebted to him.

Is it good to have knowledge of editing to be a director?

Editing is about

rhythm and tempo.

AG: Yes, absolutely! Editing is about rhythm and tempo. Similarly, your storytelling needs to be guided by tempo. You should know when to pause, or build a crescendo, or to pace up or down a sequence of events.

A good scriptwriter and a good director are, in a way, good editors too.

This is a function of scripting too. A good scriptwriter and a good director are, in a way, good editors too.

Having said that, a director need not be an editor or be required to edit his or her own film. Personally, I would rather just be the director, and let the editor advise me. That way I would have complete access to his expertise. If I get into editing my film, I will want to get into the depths of it. Then editing will rule me, overwhelm me. I may start editing right from the script stage itself. As a director, I'd rather go with the natural flow of the screenplay, the storytelling. Later, my editor has the liberty to cut what is unnecessary, slash it! Despite my tears and heartbreaks. (*Laughs*)

Can the profession of a director be mentally and physically exhausting?
AG: Yes it can be, but therein lies the stimulating aspect! It can get exhausting because you have to share your vision with every member of your team, and help remove the parallax between your visions. A good film evolves when your core technicians have your vision in their head and they contribute to it with their unique talents.

It can get exhausting because you have to share your vision with every member of your team, and help remove the parallax between your visions.

Sometimes, when the team is not on the same wave length as the director, the film can fall short of the script! So you are all the time raising them to your plane of vision. Sometimes the script is weak, and then the best of cast and crew can't help the film.

Beyond that, the administrative skills required by a director to manage so many creatively different people, making them understand your vision, along with the problems that logistics, aesthetics, production, weather, etc., can bring to your doorstep, can physically and mentally drain you! Yet you will continue to love being in the profession! Every single day! (Smiles)

Would a director also require ego management skills?
AG: I would not address it as ego. You have to set the right protocols in place; the right degree of hospitality needs to be in place, amongst

the crew, the talent, everyone. You have to keep the protocol and hospitality channels well greased. It's like, say, if a senior person walks into the room right now, it is but natural that

I would not address it as ego.

you would stand up to greet him or her, because that would be considered the basic respect you would offer someone senior. If you do not do that, and if the senior person gets a little upset about it, it is often misconstrued as ego. But I don't think so. I believe the senior would be upset because you did not follow the basic protocol of displaying our traditional manner of showing respect to a senior. So I try to maintain the protocol and hospitality which I feel our seniors, and anyone else too, deserve.

When you direct, do you direct from near the camera or from the video-assist monitor?

AG: It depends on the kind of scene I am shooting. If I have a very dramatic scene at hand, I will prefer to be near the actors, so that they are able to interact with me. That way I am able to take instant decisions on the emotional content, the level of intensity, the nuances, those kind of elements that are observed, experienced best from up close.

When I am shooting a scene that needs technical expertise, say it's a Jimmy Jib shot, or a crane shot, I would prefer to observe the frame objectively and as a whole, like we view a painting displayed on a museum wall from a certain distance. In that same way, I would view the scenario in the frame at a video-assist monitor, as I'm able to interact with my DOP quicker. I need to see the action in totality, to view it objectively.

What was your biggest lesson from your first two films not doing well?

AG: At first, I thought the audience did not get it. I was delusional that I had made something beyond their understanding and that is why they did not get it. Soon I realized, it was me who did not get it!

At first, I thought the audience did not get it. I was delusional that I had made something beyond their understanding and that is why they did not get it.

(*Laughs*) My storytelling, the narrative, was not correct. Nevertheless, in retrospect, I cherish my experience of making those two movies, because it is those very experiences that helped me make my subsequent films. If I had not made those two movies, I would not

have made *Lagaan*, which thankfully was appreciated by one and all. (*Pauses*) Sometimes I think, had those first two films been hits, my journey would have been different, quite different.

What is the privilege a first-time director enjoys, which he/she will never experience again in subsequent films?
AG: Spontaneity! I think you tend to lose the innocence after your first film. It will never come back to you! I try to inculcate that innocence in all my films. Let me tell you how I attempt to achieve that.

Spontaneity! I think you tend to lose the innocence after your first film. It will never come back to you! I try to inculcate that innocence in all my films.

I start my research and development on a script from scratch, as though I am just beginning my career as a film-maker. I apply all the methods, systems that I had in place during my previous movie. I apply it in the same fashion, tweaking them for improvements,.

To give you an example, I still hold auditions for all the actors myself! But the fact is, I will never achieve the purity or innocence of a first-time film-maker, but no harm in giving it my best shot! Another thing, I do not think of what people are expecting from me when I am making a movie just because they love some of my previous films.

Is the film business, this profession, a journey or a destination for you?
AG: For me it is a destination, even though I am not trying to reach anywhere specific in terms of the film-making process. I want to discover every form and every genre ever made, or maybe even discover a new one naturally, without conscious effort. Tomorrow, if I do a horror film it will be a new achievement. Because I do not think I can ever make a horror film. However, if I get an opportunity to do it, or if the next story I want to tell happens to be horror, I would surely give it a shot!

I would love to make a war film! There are directors who have done that with great elan. Therefore, for me, (*pauses*) maybe it is the destination, actually. Because I am still trying to reach the epitome of film-making I see in my mind's eye.

Who knows, but I may want to make a detective mystery as my next film, as it is something I have never done! Reflecting on my past films, I have explored the Awadh culture in *Lagaan*, the Rajput culture and Urdu ethos in *Jodhaa Akbar*, the Gujarati culture in What's Your *Raashee*?, the Bengal culture in *Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Sey*, etc. Therefore, for me each of the films has been a different experience!

Having said that, there is also a destination in my mind's eye that I hope to reach someday as a film-maker.

If your child comes up to you and says I want to be a director, a film-maker, what would you advise him or her?
AG: When my son Konark told me he wants to be in films, I said, 'Absolutely, go ahead! Do it with formal knowledge, get the right training to hone your skills; get a film degree.' And so he completed his graduation in Film Production from Emerson College in Boston.

As for the path, it is for him to discover and decide what path to take post-degree. I would also advise him to gain additional knowledge in some technical field within the film-making process, like cinematography or editing, or even sound design. Some additional expertise is necessary apart from direction.

Do you have a message for the generation today?
AG: I would love to share the three Ps I live by. The first one is Preparation. If you are getting into movies, or business, or starting college, whatever and whenever you wish to do, meticulous preparation is necessary. The second is *Perseverance*. You have to persevere regardless of rejection or failure. You have to

I would love to share the three Ps I live by. The first one is Preparation. The second is Perseverance. The third is Patience.

persevere to see your dream through. The third is *Patience*. Even though you have meticulously prepared and diligently persevered, you might still have to wait for the right opportunity. That's where patience comes in.

Let us look at Nature for validation; the monsoon clouds take months to float into place and bear water, trees take years to bear fruits. Many people succeeded not because they were more talented, but because they persevered for much longer than the more talented ones. I am reminded of a story someone told me about actor Harrison Ford; he had struggled for many years before he made it big in Hollywood, he did odd jobs like being a carpenter even while he did small roles here and there. Someone asked him, how he made it. He replied, 'Many of my acquaintances and even friends, some more talented than me, left Hollywood, returned home, some migrated to other cities to do other jobs, they gave up because they could not wait any longer. I just never left. '

Cinematographer Mahesh Aaney Speaks on Ashutosh Gowariker

When Ashutosh and I worked together in *Swades* (2004), we had already worked together on quite a few TV commercials. So we already shared a good understanding with each other and of each other's craft.

I recollect, when he narrated the script of *Swades* to me, he began narrating it at 9 a.m., and completed it at 3 p.m. He then asked me what my gut feeling was about the film and what came to my mind in terms of the look, the tonality, etc. I replied, '*Gandhi* (1982). Those are the images that came to my mind while hearing you.'

Ashu pulled out a DVD from his bag and handed it to me, and it was the DVD of Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982). I was happy that we both were on the same wavelength. That was the reference he too had in mind for the look and visuals for *Swades*. I am not saying it was the greatest thing to happen, but I'm saying it's important for the director and cinematographer to be in sync. This is one of the most important reasons why I could create what we crafted together for that film. It won me the 2005 National Award for cinematography. Awards are given to one person; however, I had a crew of 200 who helped me get this prestigious award!

Ashutosh worked very hard on *Swades* and his vision of the film was crystal-clear from day one. While narrating the script of *Swades* to me, he stopped a few times to call my attention to a freeze-frame in those scenes, which he had already visualized as the poster shot. He even narrated one of the promo trailers of the film with the commentary! All this happened a year before we even began shooting the film! Can you imagine how much thinking it takes for a director to visualize the look and publicity before we can shoot a single frame of the film?

When a director comes prepared to shoot a film, having done his or her homework to the extent that Ashutosh does, it helps any cinematographer do his best.

Ashu always planned for the next day's shoot in advance. Although everything was scheduled and we had the call sheets, etc., of the next day's shoot, a quick meeting was held after pack-up. We would gather to discuss the scenes to be shot the next day. The next morning, actors, Ashu, other heads of departments, my assistants and I would be present and Ashu would block the scene. Everyone present would see the scene in a run and make their observations and contributions to the scene. This technical blocking with the actors was like staging a drama rehearsal. This process gave me the correct positions and movements of the actors, and a good sense of the cutting pattern of the shots within the scene; which in turn helped me to visualize the various lighting set-ups and axis break-up for the scene. If the light

set-up was going to take an hour, then exactly one hour later, the actors would return on set with make-up and costume and be ready to shoot.

As a freelance cinematographer, I have shot over a thousand commercials, apart from the music videos and films I have done. However, one trick I learnt from Ashu, for which I admire him, is to never overburden oneself. If the scene is done earlier than slated, he would not try and squeeze in another scene. He is not a greedy director in that sense. He never pushes for more than what is possible. Because there will be a limit to what a person can achieve in a span of time. This is not just about the camera gang, but as a director you must be able to sense the human limitations of every crew member working on the film.

No cinematographer would want his every film to look the same. When stories are different, the visuals should look different too. Ashu spent a lot of time with me to make me understand his mind and his script, so I was able to give him the visuals he had created in his mind's eye. For me, to comprehend a film completely I have to get into the director's head and the director has to allow me to do so. That's the ability Ashutosh has, there is no ego or any insecurity in him, in allowing me to get into his mind. That is his bigness, in my opinion. A lot of directors don't, only the really great ones fearlessly allow you to come so near.

FARAH KHAN

'Choreography goes beyond dance and song; it encompasses expressions along with the music and dance. All the directors I worked with as a choreographer were my film school, because everything you do, even mistakes, lead you to that moment in your life when you say "Action!"'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Main Hoon Na (2004), *Om Shanti Om* (2007), *Tees Maar Khan* (2010), *Happy New Year* (2014)

SNEAK PEEK

Born in Mumbai; began dancing after her father passed away; danced professionally in films from college days; first job was as an assistant director to Shankar Nag on the fiction TV series *Malgudi Days* (1987), worked on the post-production of the same; first film as assistant director: *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992); first film as choreographer: *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar;* directed first feature film *Main Hoon Na* (2004). From her first job as assistant director to her first film as director, it was a journey of seventeen years.

MY TAKE

I tried very hard to meet Farah but could not. I never gave up. She replied to me after many messages; and though her reply was very short, she had addressed me by my first name without knowing me. Later, whenever I messaged her to meet me again for her balance interview, she often replied addressing me by my first name. After Farah first replied to my message, it took me another six months to meet her.

I must mention here, of the four films she has directed, my favourite is *Om Shanti Om*. It is the rare Hindi film that got all the elements just right, including the rare quality of being tongue-in-cheek about Hindi films in general. From the innumerable films she has worked on as choreographer, the one song that of course stands out is *'Pehla nasha'* from *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992); she has choreographed some great numbers in blockbusters like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *1942: A Love Story* (1993), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), *Dil Se* (1998), and many others, but there's something

about *'Pehla nasha'* that makes it so fresh even today, a true trendsetter.

I interviewed Farah over four sessions, spread over three months, and the one moment I will fondly remember is when in the course of the interview she introduced me to her daughter who happened to walk into the living room with her doll. I asked her daughter what the name of her doll was and she was too shy to reply, so I asked her if I can address her as 'Happy-doll'. Her daughter nodded yes. I mention my very brief interaction with this lovely child because after I interviewed Farah, I felt I had been speaking to a child who will continue to harbour a happy heart in spite of the highs and lows of her films. Of all the interviews for this book, I laughed the most interviewing Farah; she was witty from beginning to end. She mentioned her father was witty. 'That is where she gets her unrelenting humour from,' I thought as I left her home with a broad smile.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Your first film brings together separated relationships and divided nations, symbolically.*
Farah Khan (FK): In a subtle way the two separated stepbrothers, or half-brothers, played by Shah Rukh and Zayed, were symbolic of the two nations, India and Pakistan, coming together in peace someday. In a sense, the story was close to my own family, which I considered to be dysfunctional in some ways.

What was very strange was, much after *Main Hoon Na* released, I chanced upon the synopsis of a movie my father had made *Apna Khoon Apna Dushman* (1962). I was surprised that it was the same story as *Main Hoon Na*. In fact, I was shocked because I had not seen my father's film! After I showed the synopsis of *Apna Khoon Apna Dushman* to Shirish, my husband, he was forever pulling my leg: 'See, I knew you had copied the story from somewhere.' (*Laughs*)

When I was scripting it, I felt every sequence must have an out-of-the-ordinary scene, shot or element. Later, I found out that director Manmohan Desai thought like that too; he would consciously create something special every now and then, so that for the audience there is something entertaining in every reel. Maybe that was his formula for entertainment. I tried to create that consciously; every ten minutes or so I wanted something entertaining to happen, so that wherever you start the film from, if you catch it on TV, it should still be a fun watch, and thus have a repeat value. I would like to add here, everyone seems to think comedy is my forte, however, I enjoy writing and directing dramatic scenes the most.

There was a dialogue, 'Bees saal ke zakhm bees din mein bhare nahin jaate.' Was it inspired from your life?
FK: No one receives a perfect family, but ours was grossly imperfect. My mother could not handle my father's failure and eventually they separated. I have stepsisters from my father; after my brother was born, my father was more into his son. The scene in which Amrita Rao tells her father, 'Every time I have tried to be a son', is biographical in that I always believed I was no less than any boy. (*Laughs*) However, I did not make a tragedy out of my own feelings in the movie. The dialogue you mentioned, spoken by the mother, reflects my own life.

Where were you born and brought up?
FK: I was born in Mumbai, I spent most of my childhood in Juhu. It was a middle-class society, with Sindhis and Punjabis. We were the only Muslims there. Everyone celebrated every festival. I tied rakhi to my brother Sajid.

We even watched movies on the street outside our building. My father, being a film-maker, would arrange for the film reels for all to watch. When I was five, my father, Kamran Khan, made a film that failed miserably and that made him bankrupt overnight. We could not escape the bad times until I was fifteen.

Before that, I had experienced a grand life; the first Chevrolet Impala car in Mumbai was owned by my father. Four days a week, I would go to Twist, a music shop in Bandra to buy vinyl records, an LP or an EP. Back home I would dance to the songs. My parents were happy with my dancing. However, at one point I remember my father telling someone he won't allow me to dance when I grow up. I heard that and stopped dancing. I began dancing only after a decade, after my father passed away. (*Pauses*)

As a child, did you read a lot?
FK: I was a voracious reader because my mom was into books, novels. I worry what if my children do not get the habit of reading, because I believe reading improves our imagination. I think I stood out in my career from others because I was well read and well educated. Therefore, I was not living in a well, and had a mind open and vast as an ocean. When I needed to learn something, I purchased books or DVDs to learn more about the directors I admired.

You write your films, did you write stories as a child?
FK: I was very good at essays. I would write poems.

What are your early experiences of watching movies?
FK: My love for movies is totally because of my childhood. The

biggest highlight of our life was when we were going to watch a movie.

On Sunday nights, while watching a movie on Doordarshan, I would feel depressed that the film would get over and then I would have to go to school the next day. I hope to create the same feeling in my audience.

Cinema would make us forget anything bad happening in our lives. On Sunday nights, while watching a movie on Doordarshan, I would feel depressed that the film would get over and then I would have to go to school the next day. (*Laughs*) I hope to create the same feeling in my audience.

What is the craziest thing you did to watch a film?
FK: I wanted to see *Dial M for Murder* (1954) at Chandan cinema; it was for adults and I was fifteen! I remember wearing my mother's bra and stuffing socks in it to seem grown-up! (*Laughs*) There was no sex in the film, so I wondered why it was adult! (*Laughs*)

Do you remember going for shooting as a child?
FK: Vaguely. However, I remember I would like the food very much, the sevai. Even the actors and their make-up would fascinate me.

What was college life like, in terms of extra-curricular activities?
FK: When I joined St. Xavier's College after completing my twelfth standard, the first two days I cried because I was lonely. The students in my class had already formed groups because most of them were studying there since eleventh standard. It was only later that I became popular there; my dancing skills made me popular. (*Smiles*)

I began dancing again only after my father passed away. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* reignited my passion for dance. I was the one who pioneered the Western dance category at Malhar, the annual festival of St. Xavier's College. I stayed a lot in college because I did not want to come back home.

Was that because college gave you opportunity to practise dance?
FK: My parents had separated and Sajid and I were staying with my father. My dad did not have regular income, so he would rent our living room/hall to his friends for card games, and earn a tiny fee of Rs 5 per player from this service and the space he provided. My father must have earned around Rs 30–40 a day from this activity at home, and that is all the money we had to run our home, our lives. (*Pauses*)

People would play cards in our house from almost 2 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Therefore, I would ensure that I reach home only after 7 p.m. I did not want to be home while they were playing cards. So, until 7 p.m. I would simply hang out in college, taking part in drama and debates to keep me occupied. I had friends in the boys' hostel too, so our gang would have our afternoon meals often at their hostel.

What was your childhood dream?
FK: I wanted to be an astronaut. (*Laughs*) It was only when I was twenty-one that I wanted to be a film director. I dropped out of college even before graduation and began dancing professionally. I even qualified for the World Dance championship.

Did you want to study film-making?
FK: I studied arts and then dropped out before graduation because I wanted to assist a film-maker. Actually, I did want to study film-making at FTII, Pune; but in those years, my family did not have the money to send me to another city for a three-year course. In addition, my dad had passed away by the time I went to college and my mom was not in any condition to help me out financially, even though she had taken up a job at Hotel Sea Rock to support us.

When was the moment you realized you want to be in films?
FK: I must have been twenty-one when I saw Sunny Deol's film *Arjun* (1985), directed by Rahul Rawail. It influenced me hugely! Before that, when I would watch a film, I would watch it as any regular viewer, engrossed by the story, the narrative, and the characters. Watching *Arjun* changed my life. It was the first time I noticed how wonderful the camerawork was, the editing, and many things technicians would notice. After seeing *Arjun* I pestered my uncle, writer Javed Akhtar, to help me get a job as an assistant director with Rahul Rawail. However, that did not happen.

Honey aunty sent me to Bengaluru to assist her friend, director Shankar Nag, on his fiction TV series, *Malgudi Days*, sometime around 1986 or 1987. Most of the shoot was over when I joined Shankar-ji, so I ended up assisting him during the post-production. That is where I learnt the process of dubbing, mixing, remixing – stuff that goes into a film's post. I also dubbed for one of the kids in the movie. I was there for two months in Bengaluru on that job. That was my first job in the film business. I was paid very little. However, that experience made me realize I want to be in films.

Before that job, I was all ready to get married and there was

Luckily, my family warned me, 'If you get

married, we will kick you out of the house!'

nothing else to do. Luckily, my family warned me, 'If you get married, we will kick you out of the house!' (*Laughs*) Unlike most other families who would have said, 'If you do not get married we will disown you!' The thing is, my family was keen I work and be independent before I get married, also because in our family women had always been earning their own living.

My first job in films, working on *Malgudi Days*, made me realize I could do something with my life! Otherwise, until then, I was only literally wandering around doing dance acts, shows. Working on the post-production of this TV series made me realize that working as an assistant director was something I really liked, and I would like to continue in this field.

Which was your first job on a feature film?

FK: Luckily, around then, I chanced upon director Mansoor Khan. I was choreographing a show for a musician, who was Mansoor's very good friend, and Mansoor had given his bungalow for the dance rehearsals. Mansoor happened to see me there, rehearsing the dancers, and came up to me and asked, 'Can you get me some dancers? I am making a film with youngsters.' That film was Jo *Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992).

Mansoor was a big director then, and yet I boldly told him, 'I will get you young dancers for your film, but keep me as an assistant director.' Mansoor agreed! (*Laughs*) I was his fourth assistant, in charge of the clapperboard, continuity and casting. On the film, I was also in charge of getting all the actors dressed in the morning, their costuming, and bringing them on set.

I truly discovered myself in that job – my core talent and skills. Dance! When I was observing choreographer Saroj Khan-ji choreographing a song on our shoot, *'Yahan ke hum sikandar'*, in hindsight, it was my moment of epiphany. I was holding the clapperboard in my hand, all agog that now I am going to learn some great things about dancing from her. However, watching her direct the dancers and actors I realized I could choreograph that song better. I realized she was choreographing the song in a routine, filmy style! Moreover, she was scolding her assistants and the actors for not dancing with perfection. And I thought college kids should not come across as professional dancers, as that would be out of character.

The dancers were scared of asking her for help in performing the steps better, so after pack-up in the evening, on the terrace of the resort we were staying at, they would ask me to help them rehearse their steps for the next day of shoot. The dancers had become my friends by then, so they did not hesitate to ask me for help as they

knew I danced professionally too. So, I would choreograph their rehearsals every evening after shoot, and I could very naturally direct them because I had a dance background.

How did you get your first break as an independent choreographer?
FK: After three days of shooting 'Yahan ke hum sikandar', Saroj-ji left the shoot promising she would return in two days after she finished her balance work on another film. Mansoor naturally let her go, and we continued to shoot random cycling scenes and other stuff so that we do not waste time waiting for her return. After two days, Saroj-ji apologized, saying she would not be able to make it to our shoot.

Mansoor called me and said he had realized Saroj-ji was not going to live up to her promise and I should choreograph the song for his film. Even before I could respond to his offer, he told me to take the next day off, so that we both could discuss the choreography of the song. I was so thrilled when I got the offer! I think Mansoor must have noticed me help them with their rehearsals. That same night, my friends in the cast and crew had a party for me; we actually celebrated even before the shoot of the song started. That is how confident and excited I was. The first song I choreographed for his film was *'Yahan ke hum sikandar'*, and the second was *'Pehla nasha'*.

While you were choreographing films, were you consciously picking up the skills for direction?
FK: In hindsight, yes; I was always learning while interacting with the scores of good and bad directors I happened and chose to work for. Further, I never felt the lack of any skills when I directed my first film because I was so excited, so eager to direct. (*Laughs*)

I learnt about camera and lenses during my very first film as choreographer, *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar*. On the first day of our shoot, I asked the cinematographer about camera and lenses, and he taught me all about the 50mm, 75mm, 100mm, etc. Even Aamir (Khan) got down to teaching us assistants about lenses.

So choreography was your internship to becoming a director.
FK: I can say I spent twelve years learning from the masters while choreographing songs for their films. Choreography goes beyond dance and song; it encompasses expressions along with the music and dance. All the directors I worked with as a choreographer were my film school, because everything you do, even mistakes, leads you to that moment in your life when you say 'Action!'

Let us be honest and practical here, if I had not worked those many years with so many good and some great directors, nobody would have given me such a big movie to make. Your first producer

may be your best friend. However, he does not give you your first opportunity because of his or her affection; affection here is primarily for your talent and skills alone.

What does a director really do in a film?
FK: The director's presence ensures the film is made or seen through one person's vision, perspective; and if he or she is not wholly and solely in charge of the

The director's presence ensures the film is made or seen through one person's vision, perspective; and if he or she is not wholly and solely in charge of the creative decision making, things can go haywire!

creative decision making, things can go haywire! I had seen that happen while choreographing some films. Many directors do not know what they want to do and how to achieve what they want to say.

Every good director I have worked with knew exactly what he or she wanted, and knew what they needed from me, and I am certain they knew what they needed from their other core technicians and talent. The good directors I worked with collaborated with me even though the ideas were mine.

On the flipside, I was also amazed when I worked with some directors who would leave the set or location while I was choreographing their songs – amazing in the sense of their indifference. In hindsight, it worked for me, because if a director who did not know his or her job were to stick around and interfere in my work, it would only make matters worse for me and their song. The worst is the director who does not know the job, does not have the talent and skills, and yet has an ego. A ship with a captain like that will hit the rocks for sure.

Who was the producer of your first film?
FK: Shah Rukh Khan, Red Chillies Entertainment. I met Shah Rukh for the first time during the outdoor shoot of *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* (1994). It was his second film and mine as well. We met in Goa and we instantly bonded. We have worked together in various films since and our bond has only become stronger. When I took a break from choreography and was ready to direct, naturally I approached my friend first; I told Shah Rukh I want to direct a movie. He told me to write a script and revert. Soon, I wrote my first draft screenplay and waited for a good opportunity to narrate it to him. No one was eager

to work with me and I was his best friend, so I was keen he produce it for me and thus, willing to wait; I waited for many months to narrate it to him.

Finally, we were shooting for *Mohabbatein* (2000), in London, and we had to travel to a location that was two hours from where we were residing. We were travelling in a car when I told him I had written the script and that I had brought it along to narrate it to him. We were very close friends, so I told him that by then some other producers were interested, but I wanted him to hear it first. Right away, he told me to narrate him the script, and I did. He said the script was too long and it needs rewrites.

Subsequently, I reworked it and wrote many drafts over the next three years before we started production. Though my producer had sincerely committed to produce it from day one, it took us nearly three years for him to reaffirm his commitment and for the production to begin! Because, in those three years he was occupied with three films as an actor. Those three years were the hardest for me; I would get up every morning with a sole focus: 'Today I have to get Shah Rukh to begin the production!' The waiting period is almost like a twilight zone, where you feel you are neither here nor there.

Is directing actors another skill a director requires?
FK: It is definitely one of the skills a director needs. I had not directed actors before. However, I had choreographed them for over a decade and gained the skill in the process.

As a choreographer, you are also responsible for giving the actors information about the lyrical expression, because often a song has a story weaved into it. The actors must reflect the moment they are in – in the narrative, the screenplay. Therefore, we have to make the actors adhere to the required expression along with the dance steps. Sometimes we have to show them how to emote while lip-syncing the lyrics. I know of some choreographers who choreograph by simply counting 1, 2, 3, 4! I, on the other hand, analyse what the lyrics are expressing. There are different skill sets a director uses for different actors. Like you use different fingers for performing different tasks. I even act to show actors what I need.

When I was working with Zayed, in one scene I lost my temper when he was not comprehending what

There are different ways different actors need to be handled; that is why I said in the beginning that a director required the skill of dealing with people to help

them reach the director's level.

exactly I needed him to do. I scolded him, 'Just do it the way I want!'; and it worked! (*Laughs*) With Sushmita, I had another way to get it out of her. With some actors, I use humour and tell that actor if he or she spoke any slower, the editor would take that as his cue to cut the shot in the middle of their crucial moment! (*Laughs*) So, there are different ways different actors need to be handled. That is why I said in the beginning that a director required the skill of dealing with people to help them reach the director's level.

Keep in mind, actors are very vulnerable creatures, insecure, and thus extremely sensitive about their performance. I had been quite tactless in this regard in the past, and on my very first film I learnt a good lesson on how sensitive they could be. More importantly, how sensitive I needed to be. I learnt directing an actor was like being a barometer of what he needed from you. While shooting *Main Hoon Na*, I told an actor aloud on the mike that his performance was terrible and that I wanted another take. We were shooting the scene where an actor had an outburst. We began shooting in the morning and he got it correct only by midnight. He was building up for that performance for three months and that pressure got to him. He began saying the lines wrong and after many retakes I began laughing loudly on the mike because I too had lost the plot by then. The thing is, I was so passionate about my movie I would not let anyone say even one line wrong!

Shah Rukh was present on that day and he discreetly and politely reprimanded me for laughing at an actor's performance. See, I was laughing only because I could not care less by that time. But that was a huge error on my part. Laughing at an actor and doing so publicly signals the director has given up on him or her, abandoned him! Shah Rukh took that actor to another room and encouraged him and soon brought him back on the set. Only then did that actor get it correct. So when you hit a brick wall with an actor, never address him on the public address system. Have a discreet discussion with him. I feel sympathy for actors because they are vulnerable, so I feel a greater sense of responsibility towards them.

Then there are actors to whom you cannot give any information about a scene, because they get confused. If they know everything or too much, they just cannot process it correctly. Therefore, when I direct such actors, I simply order them to look left, look right, look down, look up, make their eyes big, make them small, open their mouth a bit, turn their neck … cut ! (*Laughs*) I have even directed some big actors like that. (*Laughs*) When Shah Rukh senses I am going to act and show him how I want him to perform something, he tells me not to even think about it because he is not going to copy me.

(*Laughs*)

There is another challenge directors face, sometimes when shooting with extras or secondary characters. These actors only get to perform small roles, and they try so hard to do their best and impress you or leave a mark that they tend to go overboard and it comes across as overacting. You need to tone them down.

When you direct, do you prefer to watch the performance by standing next to the camera or the video-assist?

FK: The video-assist; I see much more when I view the scene on a video-assist. When I began choreographing, there was no video-assist facility. *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997) was the first movie I worked on with a video-assist.

There is definitely an advantage using a video-assist. I can not only view the performance but I can also see what exactly the audience is going to see on the cinema screen. In addition, I can see other significant stuff simultaneously, like, whether the actor at any point is going out of focus, notice if something like the boom mike, the light cutter, or anything else that does not belong in the frame has accidentally been captured. Even though that would be the cinematographer's responsibility, but surely they welcome any additional help. Usually, my cinematographers prefer me not to hover near the camera because I am usually only shouting instructions. (*Laughs*) As for the actors, after every take, I approach them to discuss or re-rehearse the shot or scene, and then I return to the video-assist to watch the take.

What is your process of blocking a scene?

FK: I first set the camera angle and then call the actors to do a rehearsal for me and the camera. I move the camera a lot. I rehearse the scene with my actors after I have decided the set-up and the camera angle. Honestly, I rehearse the scene in my mind completely much before I arrive on the set or location. I can visualize the scene clearly weeks before; maybe that is why my shot breakdown is so detailed. I rehearse even the camera movement on a crane or trolley in my mind when I am writing the shot breakdown. I cannot go on a set unprepared, or be spontaneous like Mani Ratnam. Before the shoot begins, I know my target number of shots. Out of the target shots, I know how many are wide, how many close, how many mid-close, and how many are with the jib.

I must tell you, I was completely foxed when I acted in a film only because the director worked in a manner opposite to my own. The director was good but would make us perform the scene from start to end from various camera set-ups, angles; we would perform the

complete scene in a close-up, then perform the same from a wide-angle set-up, then repeat the same with the camera angled over one shoulder, and then repeat the scene from over the other shoulder! It was then that I realized I was a spontaneous actor and I was usually my best in one or two takes. However, because of this director's manner of shooting, I had to stretch myself. It is tiring, emotionally exhausting, and irritating too, when you do that to any actor. I know this from my own experience as a director, because I do not shoot coverage.

Do you storyboard your films?
FK: I do not storyboard my scripts because the process limits me. The visuals are very clear in my head, so my shot breakdown is very detailed, and that serves the purpose for me. I know exactly how the edit pattern will flow. I prepare a detailed shot breakdown even as a choreographer.

Working on so many songs before directing a film really helped me make my first. I storyboard action sequences and hand it to the action master, or stunt director.

How was your first day of shoot, and what did you choose to shoot on that day?
FK: The first day was superb. I had scheduled to shoot Shah Rukh's first day when he arrives in college, when he meets Zayed. However, Shah Rukh's arrival was delayed by two days, so I had to begin with some other scene. Boman was leaving the location after three days so I had to reschedule the first two days once again. Therefore, on the first day I shot with Boman, Bindu-ji, and my dancers, with Zayed running on the rooftop.

I prefer not to start a first day with a song shoot; I find that very boring. Many other directors start their movie with a song. I prefer starting the production with a scene. I shoot songs when I am tired of shooting scenes, drama, because I like and prefer to shoot drama first. Maybe because choreography has become second nature to me, and shooting drama seems more challenging, which I like.

What was your process of working with the editor?
FK: Shirish came to the location, in Darjeeling, where we had put up an editing suite and sent him the dailies. Every two to three days I would visit his edit suite and view the rushes. He would line up the shots the way I had shot them and he was doing a good job. I did not need to tweak the scenes he had edited from the footage. Shirish had trained under Renu Saluja and that is where he picked up the classic way of editing, which I liked. He would not resort to gimmicky

editing. I would sometimes ask him to extend some shots and loosen the edit. However, overall he met my expectations.

What does an editor really bring to the table?
FK: The sad yet good thing about a good edit is that it must go unnoticed. Even the art direction and camera should remain invisible. A good editor should be able to guide the director, reprimand her silently by suggesting deletion of some shots or scenes, because a director tends to be in love with everything she has shot. A good editor also (*Laughs*) enhances a moment.

Can direction be physically and mentally exhausting?
FK: Very much. From dawn to the next dawn, I am only answering everyone and even myself. The lighting crew and I wake up before anyone else and until the time I sleep, I have to see a set or some actor's costumes, or see actors lined up for casting auditions, camera or film negative trials. I have to decide the lunch menu for the crew, decide if the heroine should wear blue or red or whatever chappals. There is always something that needs my undivided attention.

Is ego management a very important skill required by a director?
FK: Absolutely. Everyone, from the caretaker of wardrobe to the star, has an ego. The lower in the hierarchy the person is, the bigger his or her ego; the smaller the star, the bigger his or her ego;

There are different ways of handling difficult egos. Sometimes you have to speak to them like a family member; sometimes they just want some sincere attention, a smile maybe; sometimes you have to scream at them, reprimand them; sometimes you have to throw a fit, whatever it takes to get the best for your film!

therefore, a director has to be very sensitive. On my sets many come without an ego, including Shah Rukh Khan! There are different ways of handling difficult egos. Sometimes you have to speak to them like a family member; sometimes they just want some sincere attention, a smile maybe; sometimes you have to scream at them, reprimand them; sometimes you have to throw a fit, whatever it takes to get the best for your film! Once or twice, Shah Rukh and I have discreetly conspired in the vanity van; he has ordered me to lose it on him, give him a shouting on the sets which should make everyone else behave,

conduct themselves professionally. (*Laughs*) I like a happy and fun environment at work. Just today, I yelled at my assistants working with me on *Happy New Year*. I threatened them that I was going to fire them if they continued to be so serious at work! I warned them that when I cracked a joke, however silly, everyone had to laugh and be happy. Now the problem is they laugh at everything I say. They took me too seriously! (*Laughs*)

You are a woman director. Have you ever faced any bias?
FK: In this business there is no bias of any kind, no gender or religious discrimination. The movie business only seeks out talent and hits. That I think is fair since a producer, and even the next level of investors on your film – the distributors, the exhibitors – must earn back their investments, and that is why they are going by your film's box-office success alone.

Is film-making a destination or a journey?
FK: It is a journey. There will always be an end to this journey, but then a new journey will begin. Film-making is like a cruise, you are not staying for too long at any one place,

Film-making is like a cruise, you are not staying for too long at any one place, and the fun of the cruise is in the travelling, you land at some spot for a few days and then you have to move on towards the next destination.

and the fun of the cruise is in the travelling. You land at some spot for a few days and then you have to move on towards the next destination. In this journey, if you ever think you have arrived at your destination, it is over for you as a film-maker. For me, I am going to enjoy the new journey I am currently on, *Happy New Year*. My next film will make me meet new people, new experiences. I will have a new set of technicians, crew, because that will add a freshness and new energy to my new film but I will also keep a few people on my next new journey, because I also need anchors.

If your own child wants to be a film-maker, what would you advise him or her?
FK: I will be very happy if my child wants to be a film-maker. I do not think they are going to do anything else in life in any case. (*Laughs*) I

think my son has clearly decided that when they make Spiderman after twenty years, he will be the hero. One of my daughters has no inclination in watching any movie. The other one, I think, clearly is going the heroine way! (*Laughs*)

On a more serious note, I would tell my child, 'Do not be a director if you are not passionate about it.' Because I have seen people who want to be known as directors but they do not want to do anything that involves direction. For example, my husband even now does not care whether his name is credited or not, but he wants to make a movie. He lives Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* principle: It is not about taking credit.

A lot of directors I have seen recently care less about their post-production, and more about the media promotions with the heroine. (*Laughs*) What I am saying here is that some people want to be film-makers only because they want the adulation and press attention that comes with this profession, and that is wrong. I would advise them: Make a good film, and adulation will follow.

Further, I would tell my child if he or she wants to go to a film school, they should, but then after their film degree they should work as an assistant to some director. Because there is theory and there is a practical side to the theory.

Moreover, no theory, no guru,

Moreover, no theory, no guru, no mentor, no parent can teach what you learn in practice. The ever-evolving problems and challenges of film-making, of everyday shoot, can never be taught in any film school because any situation in life never repeats itself; the stakes and circumstances will never be the same.

no mentor, no parent can teach what you learn in practice. The ever-evolving problems and challenges of film-making, of everyday shoot, can never be taught in any film school because any situation in life never repeats itself; the stakes and circumstances will never be the same.

Another important thing about being a film-maker is that it is a people-oriented job. How you tackle different people and what you learn from each experience can only be learnt doing the job as an assistant director. Therefore, if you want to be a film-maker, fine, but first go get some experience with one.

Would you like to say something, share something from your experiences

with today's generation?
FK: Do not let anyone tell you what you can do, or cannot. I have never let anyone's opinion about me define 'me'!

Do not let anyone tell you what you can do, or cannot. I have never let anyone's opinion about me define 'me'!

Only you decide what you want to do with your skills and do what makes you happy. Do not let other people tell you what can make you happy because then you will never be happy. People will tell you lot of things about what you should or should not do. However, they will forget about you within minutes or days after they have left you, so do not spend your entire youth or life thinking about what they told you. Hear what the world says to you, but listen to what you have to say to yourself.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer V. Maniknandan Speaks on Farah Khan

On Main Hoon Na, Farah arrived on set with detailed shot divisions, shot-breakdown lists, etc., making my understanding of what she needs technically easier. I have worked with many first-time directors, but she never came across to me as a tender-footed beginner. (*Smiles*) And that's because of her immense experience of working closely with many good actors, directors and cinematographers.

As a cinematographer, it is also my responsibility to help a director in shooting correctly, like, getting the lighting set-ups on the X, Y, or Z axis, the look of the actors between shots, what angle and lighting set-up would be most appropriate to begin a shoot with, deciding the mood and the colour or temperature of the lighting depending on the nature of the scene – whether it is comedy, drama, and action or horror scene. That is where our expertise and knowledge, as cinematographer, or director of photography, are needed by the director. Farah takes my suggestions and is often open to my interpretations, and even to my perspective of her interpretations. That is a great quality in her. She offers me choice and freedom to interpret the shots, sometimes she agrees and sometimes she does not. So sometimes we discuss and even argue over our differences, and then we agree with whoever is more convincing. It is normal for a director and her cinematographer to disagree, because both are bound to have very strong convictions.

I was not surprised by her storytelling abilities and skills because it is common knowledge that her songs, her choreography, often have a

screenplay. I must also mention her fantastic sense of humour! One day she told us, while we were shooting, 'Some people say I have copied the story of my film from another film. I tell them, "That is untrue and impossible! Because I want to know where the story is in my film. I never have a story!"' We all burst out laughing! She uses humour to dissipate the pressures and stress that we all naturally feel during the process of making films. On set, on location, all of us are forever racing against time, weather and people's temperaments, worried about losing light or other things beyond a cinematographer's or director's control. So when you have a witty, humorous, sincere and fun-loving person as the director, like Farah is, it really eases the stress, lessens the tremendous pressures considerably. It is fun shooting her films! Even though we argued and fought sometimes, I looked forward to returning to the set the next day. Even before we begin shooting, we talk a lot about the scene. The great thing about her is she works with a bound script. All directors are not like her. Many of them write the scenes and dialogues on set, while we cinematographers wait for the shoot to begin, wasting precious time and energy of the crew. When a director, like Farah, comes totally prepared, it creates enthusiasm in all of us.

After I read the script of *Main Hoon Na*, she mentioned she wants the film to look glossy, glamorous. So she has clarity of thought and gives good references as to how she is seeing the 'look' of the film in her mind. That is very important for us, because once we cinematographers get even a basic idea of how the director is seeing the film in his or her mind's eye, we are able to provide all the camera techniques that can help support that vision and deliver the film the director wants.

When we need to block a scene, Farah comes prepared with a shot division. Very little improvisation in the script or in the shot division or shot lists happens while we shoot. She describes the actors' movements in the scene even before they arrive on set so that we can do a technical rehearsal for camera and lighting. So she makes it easier for me to deliver.

Farah can handle people very well; that's a great quality she has, along with being thoroughly prepared on the script. Her sense of humour is her greatest quality and I am glad I shared that with her.

GOVIND NIHALANI

'I believe, one's choices in film-making always reflects one's essential spirit, the values one holds within oneself, one's beliefs, one's convictions, hopes, fears and anxieties, one's social and personal concerns, and one's artistic sensibility.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Aakrosh (1980), *Vijeta* (1982), *Ardh Satya* (1983), *Party* (1984), *Aghaat* (1985), *Tamas* (1987), *Drishti* (1990), *Jazeere* (1991), *Pita* (1991), *Rukmavati Ki Haveli* (1991), *Drohkaal* (1994), *Sanshodhan* (1996), *Hazar Chaurasi Ki Maa* (1997), *Thakshak* (1999), *Deham* (2001), *Dev* (2004)

SNEAK PEEK

Born in Karachi (now in Pakistan); migrated to Udaipur, Rajasthan in 1947, after Partition; graduated in film-making with a diploma in motion picture technique, from Shri Jayachamarajendra Polytechnic (SJP), Bengaluru in 1962, with specialization in cinematography; commenced his career as an intern to legendary cinematographer V.K. Murthy on the film *Ziddi* in 1962. Continued as an assistant to V.K. Murthy over the next ten years; cinematographed and co-produced his first film *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe!* (1971), directed by Pandit Satyadev Dubey; directed his first feature film, *Aakrosh* (1980); cinematographed fourteen feature films before his first break as film director; his journey from his first job as an intern to his first film as director lasted nearly twenty years.

MY TAKE

My introduction to Govind-ji happened in a semi-dark living room of my home, watching *Tamas* (1987). That was the first film of his that I saw. I remember the goose pimples, the fear and anxiety I experienced. I was watching it along with my entire family; my father and mother were very keen to see it, because both had suffered the turmoil of Partition. We were glued to the sofa seats in our living room; even though it was telecast in seven parts, we remained connected to it. The first time I met him was in his office and he immediately agreed to be interviewed and gave me his films to watch,

the few I had not seen as yet.

Though Tamas is my favourite of his films, *Ardh Satya* is a close second, if not equally so. I remember seeing *Ardh Satya* at Metro and thinking how different the film was from the films I had been watching.

The portions of his interview I enjoyed the most was when he narrated his pre-Partition years to me, and when he spoke of his guru, cinematographer V.K. Murthy. I told him that the loveliest gesture he made was when he invited Mr Murthy to light the shot he (Govind-ji) wanted to take of Mr Murthy at his home, on 26 November 2013, when he went to visit him on his ninety-first birthday. I carried that moment with me long after I left his office. For me it reflected how sensitive, empathetic, intelligent and compassionate Govind-ji was towards a craftsman and technician, who was also his mentor. Why did he do this? Govind-ji told me, 'After his retirement, Murthy Saab relocated to Bengaluru. I was in touch with him on the phone all the time, and whenever I asked him how he was, he would reply, "I'm getting bored." When Mr Murthy was directing the lighting that day, I saw the man suddenly come alive! He was focused, alert, sharp and robust! Until then, I saw him reluctantly trying to adjust to his life away from lights and cameras, lacking the enthusiasm and energy I had always known in him. But that day suddenly, within seconds, he displayed the same energy I remember him for! Murthy Saab was born to live behind the film camera.'

After I interviewed Govind-ji, I wished I had a chapter in this book titled 'Master Class with Directors', because I would have liked to include him in it.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Thank you for meeting me for my book. Was the story of your first film as director, Aakrosh, inspired from a true story?*
Govind Nihalani (GN): The story does not refer to any particular incident as such. It just reflected the state of socio-political affairs at that time. Vijay Tendulkar, the playwright and film writer, was researching for a Homi Bhabha Fellowship at the time and his subject was 'The emerging patterns of violence as reflected in Indian theatre'. One day he narrated an incident to me that had taken place around Bhiwandi, Maharashtra. A man was found dead with an arrow wound; he was an adivasi. Another adivasi loitering around, or maybe just going about his regular day, was arrested as a suspect. What happened to this allegedly innocent man, I do not know, but the circumstances of the murder and how he was arrested impacted me. I felt sad that a poor man, who is uneducated, has no knowledge of the law, and has no means to access lawyers, has just no hope!

Tell us about what life was like growing up in Sind in 1947. You had mentioned somewhere that your experiences during the Partition were your reference points when you were making Tamas.

GN: We were living in Karachi. I was born there. I must have been a child of about six years, I remember suddenly one evening all the doors and windows of our house were being banged shut! It was early evening and there was panic in our locality as it began to shut down. Every member from our joint family ran out on the building parapets and balconies to see what was really happening in the panic-stricken streets below. Two of my uncles had not returned home as yet, and on our streets, allegedly, communal riots had broken out. That is my very first memory of fear and panic. It's etched in my consciousness, and I remember becoming silent, and simply staring at the elders in our family, and the strangers on the streets, unable to fathom their strange behaviour.

One day, my father had brought some cloth wrapped in paper. I took that paper and with a black pen I wrote on it in large letters, 'Inquilab Zindabad'. I was only six, yet I knew how to read and write because my father tutored me at home. We children were waving around that sheet of paper like a kite, shouting the slogans for our freedom. My uncle stopped us from doing that lest we attract any unwanted attention.

One afternoon, during a curfew, there was total silence and it was very hot. Suddenly, I heard a piercing scream from the street. I ran out of my room and stepped out on the parapet of the fourth floor of our house and looked down the street, and saw a stranger rolling on the ground, blood running from his back. Apparently, he had been stabbed, and the knife was protruding from his back! I saw someone disappear into the side lane. Suddenly, I felt a strong pair of hands grab my shirt collar from behind and pull me back, it was my mother. She took me back indoors. So, my first memory of seeing blood is from there, and so is my memory of intense heat, panic, fear and what curfew means.

One day, our building was attacked by rioters. Luckily, my father managed to inform the police before the telephone lines were snapped. The rioters ransacked the three floors below us, and were now banging on the main door of the fourth floor where we lived. The police arrived just in time and we were saved. My father soon procured nine air tickets for our family, from Karachi to Jodhpur, and on a Dakota aircraft we arrived in India. We landed

Once I decided I was interested in films, and this was just before I went to

Bengaluru to study filmmaking, I said to myself, 'One day I will make a film on a story based on events during the Partition of 1947.' Tamas was the result of the impact of those experiences.

in Jodhpur, and soon travelled to Udaipur where we finally settled down.

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While you were in Karachi, or later while in Udaipur, did your family watch films regularly?

GN: During my formative years in Karachi, my uncle or father would take me for religious films.

I clearly remember watching a film titled *Narsi Bhagat* (1940), directed by Vijay Bhatt. I mention this film because I distinctly remember a shot from it, even though I was just a child of five or six. It was a shot of the camera tracking forward to a set of pigeons being held by a small boy. When the camera pulled back from the pigeons, the shot dissolves to another set of pigeons and the camera pulls back further to reveal an adult, a man feeding the pigeons – the boy had now grown up. Which meant the story had travelled ahead by a few years. The dissolve between those two shots made me understand what had happened in the story, in the life of that character on screen. I remember that moment, and I remember that I understood it then that the boy had grown up. Though I came to know only years later that the process was called 'dissolve', I remember the excitement of having understood what had transpired in the story then.

Many of your films have been adapted from books. Tell us something about your reading habits in those days.

GN: While we were living in Karachi, I did not attend school because my father taught me Hindi at home. I even read parts of the Mahabharata then. In hindsight, right from my early years, if I analyse my reading habits, I have liked reading drama with strong characters.

I consider the Mahabharata to be one of the great templates for narrative structure. If you are born in India, it becomes a part of your subconscious. It is a great template for film storytelling as well.

If I were to analyse my films, I will perhaps realize that I have always been interested in characters, and not necessarily in the plot woven around them. For me, character is the most important. Yes, I

must have an interesting plot,

I believe, one's choices in film-making always reflects one's essential spirit, the values one holds within oneself, one's beliefs, one's convictions, hopes, fears and anxieties, one's social and personal concerns, and one's artistic sensibility.

because without plot there is no movement. A good narrative creates good characters and vision; it should be a progressive and positive vision. I believe, one's choices in film-making always reflects one's essential spirit, the values one holds within oneself, one's beliefs, one's convictions, hopes, fears and anxieties, one's social and personal concerns, and one's artistic sensibility.

Any other influences from your childhood days?
GN: One thing I fondly remember, and which must have influenced me as a cinematographer and film-maker, is the visits I made along with my father to the temples in Udaipur. I liked the style of singing performed in the Shreenathji temple. There were beautiful murals in the temples depicting Krishna's life. I became very fond of these paintings; visually they were great, and then I discovered the magazine *Kalyan*, which would be illustrated with dramatic drawings. In our residential colony, I would sketch scenes from the Mahabharata on the cement walls, using charcoal. I used to enjoy doing it. Whatever I have done in my life, I have enjoyed doing it, and have done it only because I got great happiness from it.

One person I must mention here, as a big influence, is one of my cousins, Kanhaiyalal. He was a still photographer, and because of him I became familiar with photography. He had a photo studio and would shoot people's portraits, so I would watch him light up his subjects. I can say that was my first experience of lighting up faces with artificial lights. (*Smiles*)

Udaipur Public Library was another big influence during my formative years. In the evenings our large family would go to a public park, sit on the grass and play cards. I was not interested in cards and noticed this big building in the middle of the park. I asked my uncle what it was. On finding out that it was a library, I went there and became a member and discovered not just novels, but books on paintings too. It is there that I discovered the

I remember the shot where Van Gogh is

sitting in a field, setting up his canvas, and he doesn't know what he should paint next when he happens to look up at the sky, and he sees some crows flying out of the field, and that, just that visual becomes the subject of his painting. And eventually, that painting became a great work of art! Inspiration and creativity usually arrive so simply that it is just a matter of being primed to receive it. And then it is a matter of getting down to work. At the end of the day, it all lies largely in getting down to work, writing the poem, writing the music score, making the film or whatever.

Renaissance and Roman paintings, along with Greek myths and English literature, etc.

One of the great films I saw at that time was *Lust for Life* (1956), a film on the life of the famous Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, directed by Vincente Minnelli. I remember the shot where Van Gogh is sitting in a field, setting up his canvas, and he doesn't know what he should paint next when he happens to look up at the sky, and he sees some crows flying out of the field, and that, just that visual becomes the subject of his painting. And eventually, that painting became a great work of art! Inspiration and creativity usually arrive so simply that it is just a matter of being primed to receive it. And then it is a matter of getting down to work. At the end of the day, it all lies largely in getting down to work, writing the poem, writing the music score, making the film or whatever.

Later, when I joined film school, I saw *Red Shoes* (1948), a film about a ballerina who must choose between art and love. Both these films were shot by major cinematographers whose work I came to admire later. *Red Shoes* was shot by Jack Cardiff.

You began your career in films as a cinematographer; when did you buy your first still camera?

GN: I bought an Agfa camera when I was a teenager living in Udaipur. I had won Rs 30 when I wrote a story about a possible UFO sighting. I

asked my aunt for the Rs 220 I needed to buy the camera, and then travelled to Mumbai during my holidays and purchased one. It was a rainy day, and the first photographs I took were of gigantic waves hitting Marine Drive front. Incidentally, many of the photos I took that first day were overexposed! (*Laughs*) However, I managed to get some good portraits of random people on the streets.

When did you decide you would like to be a cinematographer, or a film director? Did you want to be a director before wanting to be a cinematographer?
GN: I began with a dream to be a cinematographer. When I finished my schooling in Udaipur, my family was not doing well financially. So, when I expressed my desire to learn about film photography, my father was not too encouraging. But that's only because my family needed me to stand on my two feet as quickly as possible; the forced migration had unsettled us financially, so naturally my father was keen that I learn some professional skills and begin earning my living.

When I was thinking about various career choices, I came across an advertisement for a course in cinematography. I remember, this word 'cinematography' – the combination of cinema and photography – had a very strong impact on my mind. My choice was made right then. (*Smiles*)

My father was not amused by my career choice. In fact, he was very disappointed and apprehensive. But I insisted. There was an impasse.

However, there was our family guru, a learned and spiritual man we revered, he was due to visit our home soon. My father told me, after he had been persuaded by my aunt and uncle, that only if our family guru, Brahmanand-ji, advised I should do the film course, would he support my decision. I agreed.

Brahmanand-ji studied my horoscope and said I was destined to pursue a career that is a mix of art and machines, and it will serve me well. Now, that's exactly what a camera is, it's a machine that helps capture the art of cinema. He told my father, 'Let Govind pursue cinematography.' So my father agreed to pay for my studies. It was a three-year course. Only afterwards I found out that, while I was studying in Bengaluru, my family back in Udaipur was going through tremendous financial despair. Yet, I was never stopped from studying. From that point of view, my family supported me completely.

You had mentioned cinematographer V.K. Murthy was your mentor and guru. Can you tell us how you met him?
GN: The first time I heard the name of Murthy Saab was when I joined the diploma course at SJP, Bengaluru. Mr Murthy was a legend in our

institute, having photographed Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* and *Kaagaz Ke Phool*. I was fascinated by the camerawork in these films. I decided to work under Mr Murthy in Mumbai.

After we graduated from the course at Bengaluru, it was mandatory to complete six months' apprenticeship at a film studio and get a certificate from them; only then would we receive our diploma. I chose to do my internship at Famous Studios, Mahalaxmi, Mumbai. At the time, *Taj Mahal* (1963), cinematographed by Mr Balkrishna, and *Mere Mehboob* (1963), cinematographed by Mr G. Singh, were being shot. I started looking for Mr Murthy's residence address. (*Smiles*)

I got his address from someone and went to meet him at his house. I told him I was from SJP, and expressed my desire to work with him. Mr Murthy was very kind, and he asked me to come for the shoot the same night, at Filmalay Studios in Andheri. Director Pramod Chakraborty's film, *Ziddi* (1964), was in production, and that was my first film with Mr Murthy. Mr Murthy is the man who changed my life forever. I must have worked on six to seven films with him, but we remained in touch until his last days.

Considering the legendary cinematographer V.K. Murthy was your mentor and guru, can you share with us something special about your professional and personal relationship with him?

GN: After Mr V.K. Murthy passed away, I pondered on the essence of my relationship with him. And that reflection made me wonder on the difference between a teacher and a mentor, and a guru. For me, a teacher or a mentor is one who guides one's student through the craft and technique of the profession; a guru goes beyond that and imparts an understanding and helps you discover the philosophy of your art, helps you develop a particular style, a world view, all of which evolves and you gradually develop your own style.

A guru like Mr V.K. Murthy taught me that cinematography should convey and communicate beyond frames and compositions. The intensity of the image is important, but the intensity of the emotion you arouse in the viewer of your image is more important.

The best lesson was his advice during my first film as his assistant. When I asked him which shot we were going to light up next, he told me, 'When the cameraman and director are discussing the shots, stand close to them and listen to their discussion. And you will never have to ask the cameraman which shot we were going to light up next.' After that, I was always around Mr Murthy when he discussed shot division and camera set-ups with the director. That was also a very enlightening experience for me in terms of understanding the nuances of mise en scène. And it helped me immensely when I became a director.

The most memorable incident happened between my mentor and me during the first feature film I shot independently, *Shantata! Court Chaalu Aahe* (1971). Before we began principal photography, I realized I did not have a light meter, nor a viewfinder; I could not afford to buy one. I met Mr Murthy and casually mentioned I had got the opportunity to shoot my first feature film but did not have the significant tools of my trade. Mr Murthy simply reached out to his desk and picked up his personal light meter and viewfinder and gave it to me! They were the ones he had used in all his films, including *Kaagaz Ke Phool*. I was moved. For me, that was an act of great generosity because Mr Murthy had given me his soul.

You have also worked with Mr Shyam Benegal on many films; tell us something about your association with him.
GN: When I shot films for Shyam Babu, most of the locations were outdoors, where most elements were not in control of anybody; one had to deliver within the limitations of a particular location. Those experiences taught me the importance of maintaining the consistency of lighting, introduced me to light-balancing principles, so that there was no jump or jerk in the look and feel of the scenes being shot on location.

Exploiting the location to create maximum impact of scene, of storytelling, is one of the most valuable experiences I gained working with Shyam Babu. I evolved tremendously as a person, as a film-maker, while working with him. When he and actor and playwright Girish Karnad, or when he and Satyadev Dubey or Tendulkar used to have discussions, I would hang around with them. Because their discussions would be deep and varied, they helped me gain insight into socio-political issues, literature, history, economics of various demographics, etc., my mind really began to open up and my horizon expanded. I started reading different kinds of books. In short, I started looking at things differently.

How did you earn your first film as a cinematographer?
GN: Writer, playwright and theatre director Satyadev Dubey was a close friend. We came into contact when I shot for Shyam Babu, and we decided that one day we would produce a film together and I would photograph it. Tendulkar had written a Marathi play, *Shantata! Court Chaalu Aahe*. We decided to make a film based on that play, financed by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) which later became the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). We applied for a loan to FFC to make the film and it was granted. That is how I co-produced and photographed my first feature film, under our banner, Satyadev Govind Productions. (*Smiles*)

It was only after this film that Mr Shyam Benegal offered me his first feature film *Ankur* (1972) to photograph. I had already worked with Shyam Benegal before *Ankur*, on some of his advertising films and documentaries; so we were already familiar with each other. Thus our coming together on a feature film seemed natural.

How did you earn your first film as a director?
GN: I think I mentioned earlier how Tendulkar narrated the incident in Bhiwandi. Based on which he wrote my first feature film as director, Aakrosh. When I approached FFC (now NFDC) for funding, FFC agreed to finance my film, provided I shoot it in 16mm. Incidentally, those days, Manmohan Shetty, the founder of Adlabs, was setting up a new facility of blowing up 16mm films to 35mm prints for theatrical release. And he was looking for good film projects to kick off his new venture. Eventually, Mr Shetty not only processed our film on credit, but also gave us funds to complete the shoot. *Aakrosh* was produced by Mr Devi Dutt, Guru Dutt's younger brother, whom I had known since he was the production executive on Shyam Babu's films which I had photographed.

Your films are known for the actors' performances. How do you create a good rapport with your actors? Do you conduct workshops before beginning principal photography?
GN: I love my actors. And every actor is unique and therefore there is no standard method of working with them. However, in my experience, I have realized that to get the best out of an actor, one thing that usually works the best for me is to

I try to persuade my actors to abandon their comfortable way, and attempt the difficult way in.

push him or her out of their comfort zone. I try to persuade my actors to abandon their comfortable way, and attempt the difficult way in. And when they do that, the results are far more exciting.

For example, Om Puri. I had heard about two student actors, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah, from Girish Karnard, who had noticed their extraordinary talent while he was the director at FTII, Pune. On the basis of his opinion, I suggested their names for two roles in a documentary that I was photographing for Mr Ram Mohan. While working on the documentary, I saw both of them perform, and I was very impressed by their talent. Later, when it came to casting the lead role of the young tribal Lahanya in *Aakrosh*, I thought of a couple of actors, but I was constantly visualizing Om's face in the role.

Ultimately, both Om and Naseer became part of *Aakrosh*, along with Amrish Puri and Smita Patil.

As for actors' workshops, I have conducted them for some of my films. I have always believed in the principle I learned from my friend Satyadev Dubey; I would instruct the

I firmly believe the actors must have something new to create in front of the camera, something he or she has not experienced in rehearsals before.

actors, 'Read the dialogues during rehearsals, to get the attitude correct, but do not emote at this stage; the emotional element of the dialogue must be retained for the take.' I firmly believe the actors must have something new to create in front of the camera, something he or she has not experienced in rehearsals before.

I have seen that many actors have the tendency to reduce everything to their level of comfort. Particularly the dialogue. Some do it out of mediocrity, or laziness, and some are forced to do it if the dialogues are not well written and do not flow when spoken. Speaking of the former kind, actors who suggest changes in dialogue because they do not want to make an effort, I tell them, 'Let us together find a difficult way out of this situation you find yourself in. An easy way will not help us better the written word.' When an actor leaves his comfort zone and finds a way out, the difficult way out, that is when the new energy arrives in his performance. (*Smiles*)

Tell us about your thoughts on the use of sound in cinema. And give us an example from one of your films in which you successfully employed silences in sound design.

GN: Soundtrack for me is so important that it equals an actor in a film. Elaborating on silence, once I was having a discussion with Ritwik Ghatak; Ritwik, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen were three strong pillars of the new cinema that started in Bengal. Ritwik once told me that one of the most eloquent and important elements of sound in cinema is silence! He added, 'As far as music is concerned, you must go and study Ray's early films, and listen to keenly how the music is repeated in his *Pather Panchali* (1955).'

I think the sound worked out very well, in terms of silences, in *Aakrosh*. Even in *Tamas*, I like the way we employed realistic sounds, and silences, to create an emotional impact. In *Rukmavati Ki Haveli*, and even *Drishti*, there is no background score. In cinema, the human face is an emotional landscape of the character. It is therefore very

crucial to cast the right actors for each character. And it is evident in a film like *Aakrosh* because the character of Lahanya had no dialogues in the film. Om Puri had only his face to convey all his feelings and he did that brilliantly.

Do you feel you make movies to raise questions, or to give answers, or simply to tell stories?
GN: For me, cinema is not about just telling a story. For me, it is all about creating an intense cinematic experience, whatever the genre, and sharing it with the audience.

For me, cinema is not about just telling a story. For me, it is all about creating an intense cinematic experience, whatever the genre, and sharing it with the audience.

After you became a director, did you ever feel that with every film you are improving, strengthening any weak links along the way?
GN: It always happens. There is no such thing as a perfect film. Each film is a kind of stopover in one's journey in cinema. With every film you are surprised by your new weaknesses and new strengths.

You had mentioned somewhere, 'I give tremendous importance to the transitions between scenes, how one scene will end and how it will lead to the next.' Please elaborate.
GN: During my film institute days, I remember reading a book on scriptwriting, in which Vsevolod Pudovkin gives a great example of how the way you transition from one shot to the next can create an energy, a forward thrust for the narrative. Pudovkin equates the transition, a cut between two shots, to the energy created by a drop of fuel; it releases energy which moves the vehicle forward. This analogy is forever etched in my mind. The shots for the film-maker are like drops of petrol for the combustion engine, the source of narrative energy for a film.

You are a writer and director; can you tell us about times when you have doubts about something you have written at the writing stage but leave them unresolved.
GN: There have been times when I have not been completely satisfied with something at the writing stage, and yet have gone ahead with it

hoping that I will sort the issue during shooting or editing. But it has always returned to haunt me during the edit.

But sometimes it gets solved at the shooting stage itself, when actors bring in something of their own. I can give you an example from *Ardh Satya*. When I wrote the climax scene between Om Puri and Smita, I felt something was missing, something was not correct. But I had to shoot, so I let it go. In that scene, at the end, Smita has no dialogue and Om Puri has just spoken his mind. The question then was how Smita should react to him pouring out all his angst and frustrations. Right from the writing stage the answer had evaded me. The lighting of the shot was being done, and I was setting the camera and my mind was churning. Yet, I just could not imagine how Smita should react to Om Puri.

However, a miracle happened during the take. After Om Puri finished his dialogues, Smita made an attempt to connect with Om Puri by lifting her hand and wanting to place it on his. But, she stopped short of her action midway, and slowly withdrew her hand. I realized that she had reacted from her own instincts. And it was perfect. That's exactly how that character should react. It worked very well, because had she placed her hand on his, it would have seemed patronizing to a character as strong as his, who has so much hurt and pride bottled inside him.

A director must accept that everything does not come to him or her at the writing stage. At the same time, I don't imply that one must not seek solutions at the scripting stage. I think every director's intuition tells him or her that something isn't working. There should always be space for improvisation and intuitive ideas while filming.

What is your normal process of working with an art director?
GN: Art director is a very important person for a cameraman, particularly when it comes to indoor sets. The art director and the cameraman have to be in close contact, because the cameraman must know beforehand what kind of set he or she needs to light. So, the art director has to inform the cameraman about the dimensions of the set, the approximate number of actors in the scene, along with the floor plan. On the basis of which the cameraman assesses the lighting requirement. So, it is both an artistic and a practical decision.

Another thing that comes into play is the colour of the set. In that, the director and the costume designer also get involved, along with the art director and the cameraman. All the costumes in the scene, the colour of the set and the mood of the film create the shots that we see in a film. So, the cameraman is in constant interaction with these people, the art director and even the costume designer.

However, sadly, in Hindi cinema, many costume designers play to

the stars and if the director is not strong enough, the costumes clash with cinematography and art direction.

What is the normal process of editing your films?
GN: I expect my editor to watch the shot material, and view all the shots not just once, but twice or even thrice, because he must remember the shots like he does his face. (*Smiles*) Then I sit with the editor and select the OK shots. Then I explain scenes to the editor, beyond the written word because they have read the script by then. Wherever possible, I give my editor a copy of the script with dialogue so that he knows how the scenes are flowing.

Most significantly, the director has to decide the pace of the film during the editing stage; decide which scene will come at the beginning, in the middle and at the end.

A cameraman is really a close associate of a director in realizing his vision. An editor is his close associate in bringing that vision from the camera to the big screen, because that's eventually where the films will play.

When I say a director is creating a film, I mean he or she is creating an experience for you, the viewer. As a director I have to create emotions to take the story forward, then I have to decide where to pause and pick up, for which an editor becomes crucial.

What does an editor really bring on the table for a director?
GN: An editor brings his or her objective point of view and judgement. When the editor and the director are on the same page, it is a good situation to be in. If the editor has a different point of view on something, either he or she should convince the director, or go with the director's point of view. But a director must leave space for the editor's creativity.

Pacing is another significant element an editor brings on the film. It's very important because every story arrives with its own rhythm. So pacing is really about how you vary the pace of the narrative, which helps set the correct rhythm. Another important factor they bring is their skill in dialogue cutting.

When you shoot, do you believe in coverage, or are you easily able to shoot strictly what you need?
GN: To shoot without coverage, one requires supreme confidence. (*Smiles*) Back in the days when film stock was rationed, we would not shoot coverage. Now, I prefer to shoot coverage. I shoot just enough to be comfortable during the edit, with some options for my editor.

You have made many movies; is film-making a journey or a destination?

GN: The films you make, or any work you do, are milestones you cross and move on. By the time a film is completed, you already have ten other ideas playing in your mind that excite you.

The films you make are milestones which come out of nowhere. I mean they are surprises, because you never really plan them. I never planned any of my films. I was always just looking for a story and eventually I happened to find one. Something clicked inside me. At that moment that thought seemed right; that's how my films got made.

I do get inspired from books because I like reading fiction and I read even when I am making films. After the shoot, just before I sleep, or early morning on my way to shoot I will read a few pages of a novel. And sometimes I may come across a line or a word that grabs my imagination, and it somehow leads me to a character and then an idea. I play with these thoughts subconsciously, and often by the time I finish shooting the film, that thought has materialized into a plot and story and I am ready to script it.

If your child comes up to you and tells you he or she wants to be a film-maker, what would be your advice?
GN: I would advice her to go ahead and do it and walk alone if need be. Further, I would ask her to train herself, develop mind by reading. I will never stop my child from pursuing a dream. I will tell her what activities are necessary to add value to her path. But I will never discourage my child. (*Pauses*)

Honestly, there cannot be any mantra or mathematical equation to be a film-maker. Film-making is 90 per cent hard work and 10 per cent intuition and artistic sensitivity and sensibility. But hard work cannot be evaded. Even intellectual thinking is hard work. When you begin to write a script you have just an idea, an emotion probably, but when you place pen on paper, or cursor on monitor, it is sheer craft. You have to know the technique of writing to put that idea in a narrative structure to engage the audience.

How can one develop that craft?
GN: By training. There are also principles of every craft which you can study and implement by working with that craft. For example, as an actor you are given a dialogue and you interpret the character in your mind. But you will have to speak the lines for the character to come to life. You have to learn lines and that is the training. Learning and remembering lines are training. Once you have some reasonable control over the lines, your intuition as an actor comes out, and then you can play with words, the tone, the delivery, the pitch, the physical movement; but you must have control over the craft to play with it.

It's the same for writing. You begin with an idea, but you get more ideas only by the process of writing. Many of my ideas have arrived when I am actually writing the script. The ideas emerge

I believe that when you put pen to paper, magic happens!

from the journey of the pen on the paper. I believe that when you put pen to paper, magic happens! Therefore, my first drafts and notes on ideas are always in longhand. In my notebook by pen. They travel to my computer at the last stage of the writing process. (*Smiles*)

Is there something you would like to share from your life experience with the generation today?

GN: I do not think I have reached a stage where I can give advice. (*Pauses*) However, I can just think of one thing: Do not be afraid. Do not fear because creativity is a force that will keep you alive.

You must feel excited and happy in what you choose to do, that is the way to go forward. When you create something from your passion and creativity, it should be an orgasmic moment. You have to live with an explosion of happiness in your mind.

In addition, never compare your progress with others; if you do, you will always be on the defensive. I will conclude by repeating Rabindranath Tagore, 'Walk alone if need be. Do not worry what others are doing or saying.'

IMTIAZ ALI

'I believe direction is not about knowing everything or even anything in particular. It is largely about having a story to tell, and those stories will not come from textbooks. They will arrive to you from your experiences, your perception of life. To engage with life is important.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Socha Na Tha (2005), *Jab We Met* (2007), *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), *Rockstar* (2011), *Highway* (2014)

SNEAK PEEK

Born in Jamshedpur. Did theatre in school; directed a few plays for the Rotary Club in Jamshedpur; joined a theatre group Act One in Delhi; president of the Dramatic Society of Hindu College, New Delhi, where he studied. Arrived in Mumbai to join a course in advertising and marketing at the Xavier Institute of Communications and got his first job with Crest Communications in 1994. Worked as a writer and a director of non-fiction and fiction shows on TV for seven years; directed his first feature film *Socha Na Tha* in 2005. From his first job at Crest Communications in 1994 to his first film as director, it was a journey of eleven years.

MY TAKE

I first met Imtiaz Ali when he visited a production house I was working with; he had come in to pitch his script. I realized he was a great narrator of stories. His narration of each script lasted between one and two hours, without stopping or pausing and without referring to any script or document. He narrated them purely from memory. They must have resided deep within him. He maintained eye contact throughout the narration and he did not relent until it finished.

I saw his first film, *Socha Na Tha* (2005), after I saw his second, *Jab We Met* (2007). Before he made *Socha Na Tha*, I met him accidentally at the office of a producer-director. I was there to pitch my script when he happened to be there. In those brief moments in the lobby, he came across as encouraging and affectionate, even though we were not friends.

His films that I love the most are *Jab We Met* and *Love Aaj Kal*.

When I walked out of the cinema after watching *Jab We Met*, I remember feeling immensely entertained and the feeling remained with me for a long time.

Years later, when I met him for my book after *Rockstar* (2011) had released, he was the same humble and affectionate person I had met years earlier when he did not have any film to his credit.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Thank you, Imtiaz, for meeting me for my book.*
Imtiaz Ali (IA): You are welcome. Meeting you today is a kind of divine coincidence, because I am going to talk largely about my life, which incidentally is my objective at this moment: to rediscover my roots. I believe this interview today will help me achieve that.

Where did you live during your formative years? And in retrospect, how did that help you as a film-maker?
IA: I was born in Jamshedpur, and most of my childhood was spent there. After Jamshedpur, we lived in Patna for around eight years. Jamshedpur has a mix of Biharis, Bengalis, Oriyas, south Indians from Andhra and Tamil Nadu, Maharashtrians, Parsis, Gujaratis, Punjabis, Kashmiris, etc. The mixed culture of Jamshedpur is a huge reason why I am the way I am. (*Smiles*) I have played and eaten in Sikh homes and served devotees at Gurdwaras.

Therefore, when I wrote *Jab We Met* (2007), my second film, I knew what a Khalsa-Sikh household would look like, how the character of Geet Dhillon would talk, even though I had never been to Punjab. Jamshedpur gave me my own point of view of various cultures.

I am glad you asked me this question because where I grew up has really helped me as a director. Growing up in a milieu as diverse as I did really helps you; you can relate to anyone. Nobody is alien to you any more. And this really helps you as a director because as a film-maker you are dealing with a variety of people, you are in the business of telling stories through people.

Did you read a lot as a child? Did it help you be a better film-maker?
IA: Yes. An interesting incident from my childhood took place when we were living in Patna. In the afternoon it would get very hot, so we were not permitted to play in the sun. The elders would shove us kids into a big room and lock the doors from outside until the temperatures had come down.

Initially, I would wait for the doors to be unlocked at 4.30 p.m. But one day, locked in that room, I began to look around wondering if there were things in that room we could play with. I noticed the room

had loads of books stacked up against the walls. I also remember that the room had a mildewed smell of teakwood furniture and leather-bound books. From a distance, the books looked the same, like how a cluster of trees looks the same from a distance, but only when you move closer you realize they are different species of trees. I went closer to the books and pulled out a few from their resting places on the shelves, and peeped into one of them simply out of curiosity. This book that I had randomly selected was a Shakespearean play. I began to read it, and was able to comprehend the story even though

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many of the words were unfamiliar to me then. Even though I was not able to understand the concepts and thoughts of the writer completely, I was able to appreciate his play of words, the way it was being expressed.

Thereafter, when we were shoved into that room full of books, I would pick up a book and read it from just about any page. And soon I began to enjoy my time in that locked room. My relationship with those books in that large room with teak furniture, in a huge house that had gone silent in the afternoon heat, continued for the next few years.

A decade later, when I was studying literature in school and college, those afternoon-time readings came to my rescue. I had already read most of what was being taught in school or college. The reading of literature gave me a depth of understanding as well, which has helped me as a writer and director.

The second most significant occurrence, in terms of how books influenced me, happened many years later when I was travelling by train. At Jamshedpur station, there was an A.H. Wheeler bookshop. I did not have much money on me, so I picked up an inexpensive book. It must have cost five rupees. It seemed simple in appearance and it had writings in Sanskrit and translations in Hindi and English. I began to read it and realized it had verses from the Bhagavad Gita. I was fascinated. I knew about the book because I had many Hindu neighbours. Gradually, I began reading the verses and they were easy to understand.

As I continued to read the Gita, I

understood it was nothing like whatever else I had read. Generations of wisdom like that just opens you up and changes you forever.

I think if you do anything with an open mind, you comprehend things easily. The scriptures, from any religion, are not meant for scholars alone, they are meant for the common people. And, as I continued to read the Gita, I understood it was nothing like whatever else I had read. Generations of wisdom like that just opens you up and changes you forever.

Are there any other experiences that influenced you greatly?
IA: There is a particular event from my life in Jamshedpur, which awakened my dormant senses. In Jamshedpur, I was living with relatives who owned cinema theatres. The house we lived in had two cinema theatres attached to it. We, my cousins and I, saw the same films so often that I could sit in one theatre and predict what scene was going on in the film playing in the other theatre. (*Laughs*) It was fascinating to watch films so freely and so often. The huge screen, a dark hall, people reacting emotionally to what was going on, larger-than-life images on a giant screen, there was nothing better that I had ever seen.

I had always been a bad student and now I developed the cinema habit. Consequently, I failed in class that year. (*Laughs*) I did not realize how shy or sensitive I was until I had to repeat a class. I found myself in the most

To return to a class where everybody knew I had failed was the biggest emotional disaster of my life. This incident influenced me so severely that it changed me for the better as a student and person.

humiliating and embarrassing circumstance due to my own actions. To return to a class where everybody knew I had failed was the biggest emotional disaster of my life. This incident influenced me so severely that it changed me for the better as a student and person.

My mind opened up completely. I began to listen when earlier I would just hear, and understand when I would just read. Soon, I became a great student. I also started to play sports for my school. I also started doing theatre, elocution and writing. It was a renaissance

of sorts.

Was being in films your childhood dream?
IA: I did not have any specific dream, (*pauses*) but I wanted to be a writer, a novelist, a journalist. In ninth standard, I wanted to become a professor of English. (*Smiles*)

Honestly, when I was in college, I was thinking more about getting married rather than what profession I want to belong to. (*Laughs*) There was this girl in school I wanted to marry. I had acted in a play with her, I played the character of Aladdin and she was my princess. (*Smiles*) Later, I decided I should become an engineer so that I could get a job and be able to marry her. (*Smiles*) Then I decided to take English literature at Hindu College. Then I thought if I studied business management, it would help me find a job faster and I would be able to marry her. (*Laughs*)

However, the passion for theatre developed when I repeated the ninth standard; that's when I began writing and directing plays. By the twelfth standard, I was writing and directing plays and I would always cast non-actors.

Were films your parent's dream for you?
IA: My father wanted me to be an IAS officer. But after the twelfth standard, when I wrote and directed a play, *All My Sons*, I invited my father to see it. After the show ended, I saw him standing in the audience looking at me. (*Pauses*) From his expression, I knew he had realized I was going to venture into theatre. I think he was comfortable with my aspiration, but he felt insecure that his son was entering a world he knew nothing about.

But at that time, cinema was not a career choice for me. Nor was it when I came to Mumbai and joined the Xavier Institute of Communications (XIC). It's only now that I realize I could never have been anything else but a film-maker.

In retrospect, I reached here because

In retrospect, I reached here because everything was leading me here, from the inside and out.

everything was leading me here, from the inside and out. You must understand that, considering the place where I grew up, with no one in my family being remotely connected to the arts, it was impossible for me to imagine, dream or aspire to be a film director, because that world just did not exist for us back in Jamshedpur.

RB: *When you arrived in Mumbai to be in films, did you want to be a*

director or a writer?
IA: When I came to Mumbai, I was merely looking for a job to make money, to support myself to get married to the girl I loved. I knew that I should study in Mumbai because the media business is here. Therefore, I thought if I did an advertising course in Mumbai, I would get a job, and someday she would return to Mumbai and I would be able to stay with her here.

I applied for a course in advertising and marketing at XIC. Copywriting was a part of the course and I thought copywriting would get me a job as a writer because I knew I could write well. The institute also had a film-making course, but I did not do that. Films were a world I just did not know, so I thought it was unlikely I'd work in films.

I dived into the advertising course without knowing what it entailed. I soon realized it was not about making television commercials, there was no shooting involved. (*Laughs*) My professor asked the whole class what we wanted to become. After realizing I was hesitant to reply, he said, 'Mr Ali wants to become a copywriter so that he can write poems!' And I said yes. I wanted a job in that field because I liked to write and I knew it would help me earn money.

After I completed the course, I struggled daily for a year and a half looking for a job as a copywriter. I had never tried so hard for anything in my life.

Considering you did not know what the XIC course was really about, what did you really gain at XIC?
IA: Like I said earlier, I had joined thinking they would teach us how to write. However, the course was about strategy and marketing. Honestly, I don't know about anybody

I don't know about anybody else's life, but my life is not a good life for anyone to emulate, because it is only about accidents. It is only when I did not receive what I wanted that things have happened for the better for me. I really have never had any ambition. My only ambition was to go deeper within myself.

Even now I don't know what my ambition is. Even after four films, I think I have no idea what filmmaking really is. I have no

else's life, but my life is not a good life for anyone to emulate, because it is only about accidents. It is only when I did not receive what I wanted that things have happened for the better for me. I really have never had any ambition. My only ambition was to go deeper within myself.

Even now I don't know what my ambition is. Even after four films, I think I have no idea what film-making really is. I have no idea how this world works. However, now I feel more interested in it. I do know now that this world, cinema and the experience of film-making are not different things, they are the same.

You write your own films; but in the face of rejections, what was your opinion of yourself as a writer?
IA: I knew I was good at writing, because no one told me I was bad and no one had rejected my copy. An agency that took my copy test told me, 'Great, we were looking for a copywriter like you. Join us from Monday.' However, when I turned up on Monday, that report had not arrived, so they asked me to return after a month. While I was waiting to return to the agency, I was looking for a job in other agencies. Wherever I pursued them to allow me a copy test, they offered me a job. Therefore, I knew I could write, it was just that the opportunity did not come immediately.

How did your professional journey begin, which was your first paid job?
IA: In Zee TV, as a production assistant, a glorified delivery boy. (*Smiles*) I did not get any salary for the first three months. I was there for three months. Then my friend Anurag Kashyap was offered a job with Crest Communications, but he offered it to me. He said Crest was starting a creative department and needed writers like me. He did not want the job because he wanted to be an actor. He was already an assistant director, and told them about me. Anurag came to my office in Worli to convince me and took me to the Crest office.

I met them and they hired me. I was given the job of conceptualizer/writer/director. It sounded great but it meant nothing. (*Smiles*) My job was to think of new concepts for TV serials. Since I was employed by Crest, and Shyam, the owner of Crest was a TVC maker, I would also write ideas and scripts for him. Since I knew advertising, I could give Shyam a more focused support in their creative needs.

For more than a year, sixteen hours a day, day in and day out, I typed away on their computer, writing plots, stories for TV serials and shows, but none of them saw the light of day. The good thing was I was getting paid, so after six months of joining Crest, I got married to

the girl I had courted and pursued for more than a decade, Preeti. (*Smiles*)

Tell us briefly about your various jobs before you made your first film.
IA: I started with theatre in school. I would write, direct and act in small classroom and club plays. I directed a few plays for the Rotary Club in Jamshedpur. The first professional play I worked in was *An Inspector Calls*, directed by Barun Roy. I acted in it.

Then I joined a group called Act One in Delhi. I was the president of the Dramatic Society in Hindu College, where I studied. I did about two plays a year.

After I left Crest, I directed TV serials for seven years. I did *Purushkshetra* for EL (Zee) TV, *Imtihan* for DD and Star Plus, *Naina* for Sahara, *X-Zone* and *Rishtey* for Zee and *Star Bestsellers* for Star TV. *Purushkshetra*, hosted by Kirron Kher, was the only concept I wrote during my period with Crest that saw the light of day.

How did you find the producer of your first film?
IA: Vijayta Films was my producer, and I met them thanks to an executive producer friend of mine, Sanjay Routray. While I was doing TV shows, Deepak from Star TV approached me with an exciting new concept of making films for TV to be telecast in three parts. He asked me if I had any story that would suit their need. I narrated the concept of *Socha Na Tha* to them, and they loved it and said this should be their first film for TV. They asked me how soon I could write the screenplay.

I went underground and finished writing it in three nights. They did not expect me to write it so fast, and when I called them and told them I was ready with the screenplay, they apologized that the concept was cancelled. I kept it aside.

Sanjay Routray would always tell me to let him know if I had a film story. The one move I made in my life which worked positively for me was that I called Sanjay and told him I had a story and it could become a film. He said he had a producer, a jeweller with a film company called Geeta Arts, and that I should narrate the story to them. I agreed and he called Anurag Kashyap to support me during the narration. By that time, Anurag was already known as the writer of the popular film, *Satya* (1998), so Sanjay Routray said Anurag's presence in our meeting would add weight to our story narration.

We met Geeta Arts, and they liked the story. Sanjay introduced me to Abhay Deol, and at that time I did not know he was Dharmendra-ji's nephew. I was looking for an unconventional hero and liked him for the role. It is then I found out he was Dharmendra-ji's nephew. Sanjay and I pitched Abhay for the lead role, but Geeta Arts refused

because they wanted to cast a superstar. They did not know the business, and even I did not know the business. Actually, nobody knew the business then, but I went purely by my instinct, and said, 'This story needs a new boy and a new girl.' They did not object to my opinion, but nothing progressed beyond that.

In the meantime, Abhay's cousin Sunny Deol must have heard from Abhay about my story and project with Geeta Arts. Routray was in some way connected to Sunny's production company, Vijayta Films. Sunny sent word to me that if a film was being produced with his cousin, he wanted to know more about it to decide whether Abhay should be a part of the project. This must have been sometime during the year 2000. Sunny was shooting in Shimla, he sent word for me to meet him on 6 June. I remember the date because it is my father's birthday.

Vijayta Films purchased my air ticket and put me up in a hotel in Shimla. Sunny was shooting a film being directed by Guddu Dhanoa. There was no certainty when Sunny would find the time to see me, and I might have had to wait endlessly. Soon, I was taken to Sunny's room in the hotel by Abhay, and he introduced us. I was with Sunny when news arrived that it was raining, so the day's shoot stood cancelled. Sunny jumped at the opportunity and asked me to give him a narration.

After two-and-a-half hours, he stopped the narration and asked me how much remained to be narrated. I said nearly twenty-five minutes more. He invited me to join him for lunch and continue the narration later. During lunch, he said, 'I want you to direct this script for Vijayta Films.'

The next morning I returned to Mumbai, with my first film as a director.

You had no ambition to be a film director, you never went to film school, never assisted any director. How would you define a director today?
IA: I am still kind of clueless, (*smiles*) but I believe direction is not about knowing everything or even anything in particular. It is largely about having a story to tell, and those stories will not come from textbooks. They will arrive to you from your experiences, your perception of life. To engage with life is important. The more you know, the more you can give your films.

I insist it is not about knowledge alone; it is about your perception, your point of view. The answer is in your uniqueness, that of your perspective, your point of view of things.

However, there are no definite rules. You carry on working, telling stories via TVCs, TV shows, or films, paintings, music, books, whatever. Direction is that beautiful thing that no matter what you do

in your life, whatever you have done in life will always come in handy.

In retrospect, I am happy I had such rotten luck in not getting the jobs I had wanted during the early years in my career. (*Smiles*) Firstly, I did not end up in advertising; secondly, I discovered many nooks and crannies of the city. However, the biggest gift that advertising gave me was rejection. That phase of rejection made me very strong. Only when I moved to television, did I begin to feel accepted; and only while making films did I begin feeling at home. (*Pauses*)

You did a lot of theatre during your college years. What skills did you learn that helped you as a director?
IA: What I learnt from theatre helped me while doing TV and films. What I found unique about theatre is the director's absolute focus on script, actors, characters and performance. The lack of infrastructure in theatre develops and sharpens your directorial skills, because in theatre there is no other way to express yourself but through people, the actors. In theatre, it is only the writing and the acting that you can count. Naturally, the process begins from the writing stage itself. The film director is thinking about everything: the shot breakdown, the camera, the editor. Theatre is just basics, and there is nothing that you can rely on, so naturally it will sharpen and build your directorial skills, because you have to deliver the best with just the basics.

Another great lesson from theatre is the skill of script rehearsals with actors. It teaches you how to talk to actors and what to say that will make sense to them. For example, you cannot tell an actor who is nervous, 'Don't be nervous.' He will get more nervous as you have only validated his fear. You can never state the obvious to an actor. So theatre actually sharpens that skill of a director where he learns to give an actor what he needs from a director. This one learning favours the actor completely. Therefore, actors too must explore theatre.

You have written all your films. Did you choose to write your films?
IA: I wish I had someone who could write for me, as I still feel that I am not good enough as a writer. (*Smiles*) I am writing in order to direct what I write; the writer in me is supplying the director in me. However, I would like the writer in me to exist on its own. I always felt I should find someone who will write for me, but it has never happened.

I hired a writer for *Socha Na Tha*, but soon there was no money to pay the writer, so I had to write the script myself. Something similar happened during *Jab We Met;* I wrote the screenplay but wanted the dialogue to be written by another writer. I was in Manali and it snowed so heavily I could not leave the hotel for a day. Stuck in a

hotel, I needed to do something to spend my time, so I wrote the dialogues of *Jab We Met*. (*Smiles*)

Did you ever lie about something to get some job, knowing you would learn it before anyone found out?
IA: Sometimes people introduce me as an actor-director, maybe because they know that I acted my way through to my very first job as a fiction-show director, while directing the TV serial *Imtihaan*. (*Laughs*)

After I left Crest Communications, when I was directing *Purushkshetra*, the talk show which won an award, Anupam Kher-ji and I were working towards developing a new fiction show. At that time, Anupam-ji was producing a fiction show, *Imtihaan*. I think he had a falling-out with the director of the show and confided in me that he was badly stuck in the middle of production and the show was on air, so I would have to direct the show for him.

I confessed I had never directed a fiction show before. He said, 'But you have won awards for direction, so why are you worried about your capabilities?' So I said, 'Okay, let me give it a shot, as I have no option.' Even my wife was positive about my decision. I consider that a significant event in my early career as a director.

However, I continued to worry that ninety-nine episodes had already been aired and I had not seen a single episode, and I had no idea how to direct a fiction show. (*Laughs*) When I arrived on the set, I was the youngest member of the team, and felt exactly like a boy. When I introduced myself as the director, my unit gawked at me in disbelief. (*Laughs*)

I decided to act like a director, behave like one, so that I could have power over my new circumstances. I kept at it every single day, even though at the back of my head I feared I would soon be exposed and thrown out of the set in front of the whole unit. The fear propelled me to learn even faster. If the cinematographer asked me where to place the camera, I would discuss the shot and scene in such a manner that even though he would make the suggestion where the camera could be placed, he would think it was actually my suggestion. (*Laughs*) However, while we discussed the scene and he (the cameraman Ashok Behl-ji) did what he had to do, I used to be very observant about why he was placing the camera in a particular position, and learning other fundamentals of film-making, things about camera and lenses.

In a similar way, I picked up knowledge of sound, editing, and crane and jib. When I was introduced to the trolley tracks, the dolly, the crane or jib, or the hand-held camera, I would exploit it completely. I tried to learn everything about the technology as soon as

possible.

When you were making your first film, did you wish you knew more about any particular aspect of film-making, like editing or camera?
IA: You feel that about every department of film-making, at every stage of its production, because there are new things you are learning at every stage. The good thing is that the film-making process is hands-on, so you can learn something new and apply it to your shot right away. You do not have to wait to apply what you have just discovered. You can only learn film-making while making a film, all else is theory.
What inspired you to write the story of Socha Na Tha?
IA: The idea for the story came from my own experience. I once met a girl in a cafeteria, and we got talking. She was sad because a boy was coming to see her. She told me it was ridiculous that girls were expected to marry in this way in this century. She didn't want to go home. I asked her to speak to the boy when they had a chance to be alone. I don't know what happened to her but that thought kept running through my mind, and that is what happens in *Socha Na Tha* too.

I had wanted Ishaan Trivedi to write it, and he did write a draft, but it did not go through because of money issues. Therefore, I wrote the script on my own. However, I still feel I am not good enough as a writer.

Do you have script rehearsals with your actors?
IA: I do. It helps, because the actor arrives on the set prepared and you are not wasting time of the crew and the producer trying to explain to him what you could have done earlier. Shooting time is the most expensive. I even did workshops for dance. Script rehearsals help the scripting process too. You learn from actors performing the action, mouthing the dialogue, which so far were only being said by you in your head. You get to know your script much better. When you can change things around to accommodate the new learning it becomes an organic process.

Actually, this organic process goes on even during the shoot. When you are on the set and if the actor is not comfortable speaking the lines a certain way, you change the words and help him say it with different words without losing the core of it. Now what you have really done is that you have changed the script. Whether you do it on paper or do it live on set, that does not matter. What matters is allowing it to evolve organically.

Did you create a storyboard for your first film?

IA: I sketch very badly. Nevertheless, I made some very basic sketches, especially for songs, to express more clearly to others what I had in mind. Sometimes I sketch to remind myself of my ideas, a single-frame sketch, which takes maybe fifteen to thirty seconds to make. I might have sketched five or six frames for the whole film. (*Laughs*) Sometimes I sketch just to convey a mood that has occurred to me about a scene.

Your first day of shoot, was it heaven or hell?
IA: There was a lot of tension on the first day of shoot. The location was at Sophia College, Mumbai. We began from this location because of production convenience. Abhay, Ayesha, Raj Zutshi and Sandhya Mridul were the actors. All of us were so tense about the first-day shoot that we ended up calling the crew, the junior artistes and technicians before dawn for a 7 a.m. shift. It was so early that we had to wait for two hours for the college gates to open. (*Laughs*) I was nervous before I started shooting that day. Even when I was an actor on stage, I was nervous while standing in the wings waiting for the cue to walk on stage. Once I entered, things stabilized. There was a lot of tension and there were many questions. I would ask for suggestions and arrive at the answers. Soon I realized that technique was your friend and not your enemy.

Is direction an emotionally and physically draining profession?
IA: It can be because you have to explain the same thing in different ways to different technicians and others repeatedly. Nevertheless, it is nothing to get hyperactive about, as it comes naturally.

Secondly, you know that only you are answerable for everything.

During production, some unknown force carries you. It is the combined energy of everybody. You are not thinking and acting alone, and you will be drained by the end of the day or schedule, but you will not realize it.

You cannot make an excuse and blame it on anyone, not even your assistant. Physically, you are constantly on the move, and you do not even realize how much physical or mental work you are doing. I lost a lot of weight during Rockstar without realizing the loss.

During production, some unknown force carries you. It is the combined energy of everybody. You are not thinking and acting alone, and you will be drained by the end of the day or schedule, but you

will not realize it.

Do you stand next to the camera when you direct a scene?
IA: Yes; because I want to see the action from as close as possible. I have this defect, if I watch the shot through the video-assist monitor, I sense I am watching TV and feel disconnected. However, when I stand next to the camera, I can see the larger picture, beyond the viewfinder of the camera. I relate to the mechanics of the action, and I am more aware of what the actor is experiencing. My view of the action is closer to what the audience will experience, because the resolution of the cinema screen will be closer to reality. Also, if I am near the camera the actor can address me more easily.

Do you feel there is something you could have done which could have given you your first break earlier?
IA: No. I consider myself lucky that although I was trying for movies much before *Socha Na Tha* came my way, things somehow did not progress, and I did not go ahead with them. Much earlier, I was supposed to make a film with Mahesh Bhatt Saab. After working on the script for nine months, I confessed to him I was bored of the subject. Bhatt Saab laughed and advised me, 'If it bores you, don't work on it. And don't listen to anyone who tells you that you are an idiot to let go of an opportunity like this.' I believe that had I gone ahead and made that film, it would have been a level lower than what it would have been, had the subject not bored me. Further, it would always have been there to remind me that I compromised.

What is film-making for you? A journey or a destination?
IA: After I made Socha Na Tha, and before it released, someone had asked me a similar question. I had said, 'The journey of making my first film is more important to me than its end result.

'The journey of making my first film is more important to me than its end result. The process is my true reward. Whatever happens after its release is simply a bonus.' Film-making for me is a way of life, I am incomplete without it. For me, it is a journey, not a destination. It is a deeprooted need for me and everything else is secondary.

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incomplete without it. For me, it is a journey, not a destination. It is a deep-rooted need for me and everything else is secondary.

Shooting is not the only process or stage in film-making. When I am not writing or making a film, I feel a little lost, slightly unprotected, vulnerable, strange, and probably imbalanced. Nevertheless, you need to go through that too before the next film, the next journey, comes along your path.

If your child wants to be a film-maker, what would be your advice?
IA: I would say, 'Sure, go ahead.' I would not give any specific advice, because someone's experience cannot work for anybody else. One person's experience can become a burden on somebody else. What I have learnt in this profession so far and what has worked for me cannot be, should not be, taken as a rule. It should not be considered something that will work for someone else. In fact, if someone does that, he or she may waste a lot of time. I am only talking about what worked for me.

Therefore, I would simply say, 'Please go out into the world and make your own mistakes. If you want to be a film-maker, just do it, just have fun. Do what you want.' I may have an opinion or advice for other professions but not film-making. For example, if my son or daughter says he or she wants to become a dancer or a chartered accountant, I might have some advice for them, because I would be looking from the outside. I am deeply involved in films and I know nothing specific will work, so as a director I cannot offer any specific advice.

What does the term 'direction' mean to you? When people come up to you and compliment you as a director, what do you feel you have achieved as a director?
IA: Rockstar was the first time, in the true sense, when I discovered what direction is, from a distance. I feel I have just begun on the journey.

Talking of achievements, there is nothing I can spell out in words about what I have to achieve. However, I know the journey is just beginning. After all the success and failure, you get refined. If you get a big award you do not deserve, you will become fake. If you get what you deserve, even if it is not good enough, you will become stronger for it.

What are those special things you feel you have received being a film-maker?
IA: Cinema – film-making and writing – has given me a world that I can carry inside me at all times. It has given me a story, and that story

is like an antibiotic, it protects me from everything. This story constantly occupies all my senses.

If words could express everything, cinema would not exist.

This story has a world with all kinds of things – trees, colours, people, emotions, etc. When you wake up or you sleep, something is going on in you. It is not easy to put in words. If words could express everything, cinema would not exist.

'Go find your own journey. Walk on your own feet. Think from your own mind. See with your own eyes. Envision your own ideas. They can be worse or better than someone else's but they are all you will ever have.'

Would you like to say something, share something from your experiences with today's generation?

IA: I would say, 'Go find your own journey. Walk on your own feet. Think from your own mind. See with your own eyes. Envision your own ideas. They can be worse or better than someone else's but they are all you will ever have.'

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Subramaniam Speaks on Imtiaz Ali

After Imtiaz narrated the story of *Jab We Met* to me, he asked me what was in my mind, how do I plan to shoot this film. I told him a film like this could be shot in a very glamorous way, or it could be captured with an earthy and simpler look. I told him we should capture two souls in love and we could achieve that if we shot them in an earthy manner. He told me to capture the earthiness of the two souls, because that's exactly the way this film should be shot; and that's how I captured their story.

He does not take long in accepting suggestions that will enhance his storytelling.

Another good thing about him is how close he stays to the actors and their performance; he rarely looks at the action from the video-assist monitor, unless I ask him to. I have to literally push him sometimes to go to the video-assist monitor and just have a look at the

frame. (*Laughs*) Only then will he have a look at the frame and confirm to me if he is okay with my framing of the shot.

When he is not satisfied with what the actors are doing during a take, he does not need to see the shot later in the monitor to know if the shot was not good. He knows it as soon as it happens, and will cut the take midway. I think he has this great ability because the story and characters are very clear in his mind. His films are within him. We only project it back to him with our techniques.

I can set up the angle and camera without asking him or even do it in his absence before he arrives on set. If he likes what I have set up, he goes with it. If not, he says it's not suitable and I change it.

We interact mostly during shoot, and not before. I think being a writer, he needs to work things out on his own before he begins to shoot.

The best thing about him is the detailed and visual manner he narrates the script, the scenes; I can see the film even before shooting it. He helps me see what he wants so clearly that it helps me give it to him, with my own images added to his.

MAHESH BHATT

'We are connected to that original heartbeat that first echoed in the heart of the caveman. Just because you see the galaxies through powerful telescopes now that does not mean you understand them. So nothing has really changed and nothing needs to. So sing a song and gather an audience around you. Sing your song and go.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Manzilein Aur Bhi Hain (1974), *Vishwasghaat* (1977), *Naya Daur* (1978), *Lahu Ke Do Rang* (1979), *Arth* (1982), *Saaransh* (1984), *Janam* (1985), *Naam* (1986), *Kaash* (1987), *Thikaana* (1988), *Kabzaa* (1988), *Daddy* (1989), *Awargi* (1990), *Jurm* (1990), *Aashiqui* (1990), *Swayam* (1991), *Saathi* (1991), *Dil Hai Ke Maanta Nahin* (1991), *Sadak* (1991), *Saatwan Aasman* (1992), *Junoon* (1992), *Maarg* (Unreleased), *Phir Teri Kahani Yaad Aayee* (1993), *Gunaah* (1993), *Sir* (1993), *Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke* (1993), *Gumraah* (1993), *Tadipaar* (1993), *The Gentleman* (1994), *Naaraaz* (1994), *Milan* (1995), *Naajayaz* (1995), *Criminal* (1995), *Papa Kahte Hain* (1996), *Chaahat* (1996), *Dastak* (1996), *Tamanna* (1998), *Duplicate* (1998), *Angaaray* (1998), *Zakhm* (1999), *Dhun* (Unreleased), *Shatruta* (Unreleased)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Shivaji Park, Mumbai; his father was a film-maker, his mother was an actor; joined films to earn a livelihood; first job in films as assistant director to Raj Khosla on *Do Raaste* (1969); first film as director, *Manzilein Aur Bhi Hain* (1974); It took him five years from his first job in films to his first film as director.

MY TAKE

I chased Mr Mahesh Bhatt for nearly a year to get him to meet me for just a few minutes, to tell him about my book and why I need to interview him. I must mention here, from the innumerable films he's made, my favourites are *Saransh*, *Naam*, *Daddy*, *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin*, *Awargi* and *Zakhm*.

When I did meet him for my book after nearly a year, he agreed to be interviewed within minutes. But, when I asked him when I could meet him to begin his interview for my book, he told me he did not

feel motivated because he did not believe in making a myth of himself. I told him the idea is to demystify Mahesh Bhatt, demystify directors, by revealing they are as human and vulnerable as any of us. He immediately agreed to be interviewed.

After I had edited his interviews, he politely refused to read the interview draft, telling me, 'I do not wish to read it. I believe it's up to you to put a frame on what you heard from me, choose the lens you saw me through. Who am I to approve or disapprove it? I trust you, so you go ahead and publish it the way you edited it.'

Although this anthology is mostly about the directors' lives up to their first film and their opinions on film-making, I widened its horizons for Mr Mahesh Bhatt, and it happened naturally while speaking with him.

This was more than an interview, this was an experience we both shared. Every minute I spent with him remains etched in my memory.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *In Naam (1986) Kumar Gaurav tells the heroine, 'Karz utara ja sakta hai, ehsaan nahin.' Is there someone who you feel did you a favour in your career as film-maker whom you can never pay back?*
Mahesh Bhatt (MB): In my professional life, there is one angel: Johny Bakshi. When I was just a third assistant director, he saw in me a vibe, a kind of talent which only perhaps he could see. We were at Filmistan Studios, and he called me out and said, 'There is a producer friend of mine, who wants to make a film. Can you direct it?' And I was still carrying the clapperboard on my shoulder. I remember telling him, 'If I can't, nobody in the world can.' And with that began my journey, but it was my producer Johny Bakshi who picked me up. I need to repeatedly acknowledge the contribution he made to my life. It was he who looked at me the way I wanted to be looked at.

Let us rewind to your formative years; where were you born and brought up?
MB: I was born in Mumbai. The year was 1948. I was born in free India to a Hindu, Nagar-Brahmin, Gujarati father and a Shia Muslim mother. We lived at Shivaji Park. There is a building nearby, which I've immortalized in my film *Saaransh* which was shot in the area of my childhood.

What was the profession of your parents?
MB: My father, Nanabhai Bhatt, made over a hundred films in Gujarati and Hindi. My mother was an actor. But they were not married by the standards of the world. It was a marriage that did not have legitimacy. My father was married to another Hindu woman,

who was his legal wife. So we were the children of sin. We were looked upon as aberrants by the world. (*Pauses*) But my father was a very nice man. He used to keep coming to see us but he never stayed with us. I remember him not removing his shoes at home; that scene is there in my film *Zakhm* (1998). That is my memory.

With a Hindu father who did not stay back at nights, and a Muslim mother who gave you a Hindu surname, what kind of family life did you have?

My mother, though a Muslim, was the one who told me the story of Lord Ganesh and Shiva and Parvathi. It was she who introduced me to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and also gave me the chant 'Ya Ali madad Wali!' a Shia chant.

MB: My mother, though a Muslim, was the one who told me the story of Lord Ganesh and Shiva and Parvathi. It was she who introduced me to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and also gave me the chant 'Ya Ali madad Wali!', a Shia chant. I went to a Christian school Don Bosco, where 'Ave Maria' was our daily prayer. The sounds of those prayers and bells are in my consciousness. So my body has the memory of the sweet modak of Ganpati Utsav and also the sweet sevainya of Eid, which we used to eat while visiting my aunt's place, actor Emraan Hashmi's grandmother.

But back home at Shivaji Park, we were Hindus; my mother wore a tika, tilak on her forehead and a mangalsutra around her neck. She would not project that she was Muslim. She gave us Hindu names because we had a Hindu father. I remember she would say, 'You are a Nagar-Brahmin son, and you're Ashwin Shakha and of Bhargav gotra.' These are sounds that have stayed with me and I couldn't figure out what she was really saying. She used to take me out every Thursday to Mount Mary's church in Bandra. She used to make me climb on her shoulder to touch Jesus' foot. The secular idea of India was a physical reality for me. It lived in my home.

You had once said your father's film Son of Sinbad (1958) changed your life.

MB: I was very young, six or seven years old, when the movie made me realize that there was a magical world in the hearts of people and then there was a reality which actually existed. My father was showing the film to all the kids on the terrace of my building. I still

remember being fascinated watching the actor get on the magic carpet and take flight with the good fairy to a treasure island. But suddenly the image froze. We soon found out that the film had got stuck in the film gate and caught fire and the projector had stopped. My father told us, 'Don't worry, I'll fix it.' And then he started like a craftsman, trying to fix the broken film. While he got occupied with the task, I looked up at the sky and realized that the film world and the real world were two different worlds. Just like my mother's world inside the home and outside. There was this kind of serene, still silence under the night sky.

I realized there was a universe out there that I alone chanced upon that night with the projector jamming. I wanted to see those magical images come to life again, on the screen between earth and sky. And that's when loneliness, a deep sense of loneliness invaded me as a child. And it did not leave for years. I feel it even today. (*Pauses*) Something had broken, they said the filmstrip had broken, but for me the magic had frozen because for me the veil had lifted. The veil of illusion was gone with the film coming to a stop. I think from then on I wanted to belong in the magical universe of films, in the world of veil of illusions.

As an adult, how did you pursue this desire since childhood to belong to the world of the movies, a world even your father belonged to?
MB: During my college years I discovered that I was struggling to pass. St. Xavier's College had thrown me out because I had low attendance, so I attended morning college at Nationals' in Bandra. By noon, I would go to Mehboob Studios to work for director Raj Khosla. I was proactive, so I had approached him for a job as his assistant director. I began reading film books in earnest, by going to the USIS (United States Information Service) library, and the British Council library to read books on film-making and film-makers.

Raj Khosla Saab had some books on cinema in his chamber, and before work began I used to enter his office, take all the books and read them there and put them back by the time office began. However, I soon discovered that the film world I was working in and the world of cinema I was reading about in these international books were quite different. There was no connection between what I read and what we made. Soon, I discovered that film-making was something you learned by film-making, by making movies.

Cinema was a language I understood from my early years. This was outside the ambit of the written word. The audio-visual image was free of the tyranny of the

written word, which I was not very good at, which had a kind of confinement. So I found the audio-visual image idiom very liberating, very uplifting.

When I got lonely, I used to fight it by telling stories to myself. I used to make up stories in my head with complete scenes and characters. Cinema was a language I understood from my early years. This was outside the ambit of the written word. The audio-visual image was free of the tyranny of the written word, which I was not very good at, which had a kind of confinement. So I found the audio-visual image idiom very liberating, very uplifting.

Did you write stories as a child or did you begin when you came into the film profession?

MB: I began writing only when I became a director. As a child, I was an observer. I used to go to the beach very often. Next to the beach there was a crematorium and I would watch people come in with their near and dear ones, watch them wait for the last gasp of fire to consume the wood and body. From a distance, I would wonder whether the person consumed by the fire had escaped to the heavenly abode as smoke, or whether he or she had been reduced to dust in the last sputter of fire.

I observed a man who lived within the confines of the crematorium with his wife and daughter. They lived in the corner and there were clothes drying there like in any normal house. The daughter seemed unaffected by what was going on and I could understand that their survival depended on the corpses that arrived.

I remember the story that I had worked out in my head observing all of this: There is a child who resides in the crematorium and smiles every time she hears 'Ram naam satya hai' because she knows her father will receive money today. And her father, on seeing her happy, would tell her, 'Don't smile on seeing people arrive here.' But a child is simple, so for her someone's death is a source of her family's livelihood. I remember thinking about these kinds of stories in my head while watching the cremation process. I was very young, about ten years old, when I observed this and thought it all out.

So I have always been observing people, believing what is being said to us is not the real story. The real story is hidden in the unsaid, and that's what I was really interested in; maybe because my home was like that.

I had discovered that what we were living was a lie because my mother was not the person she was projecting when people were around or when she was outside the house. She had kept her Muslim

identity hidden from everyone but us. That is why I am interested in a home after all the guests are gone; that's when the home's rhythm changes, the body language of the family members changes, the true rhythm kicks in, the silences return. And that is when I would like to step in and write my story about that home. How comfortable are those silences? That's where the truth lives.

When did you first understand what a director does?
MB: I remember watching my aunt, Emraan Hashmi's grandmother, Poornima. She was an actor and her second husband, Bhagwandas Verma, was a film producer and director. I'd gone to the sets of a picture called *Baagi Sipahi* (1958). I was a kid and it was a great costume drama with Madhubala, and I remember being starry-eyed, looking at the beautiful moon inside the set.

There was a scene she was performing, and before she would act, a clapperboard would sound and move away from the front of the camera and the actor, then she would say some lines but soon burst into laughter. This kept on happening … she was having a laughing fit and there was a man standing near the camera who would ask her what was wrong, and then he would tell her not to do it in a certain way but to do it in another way and this went on.

That is when I discovered that there was somebody whom we do not see in the film, someone who tells the actors we see on screen what to do because the actor doesn't do things on her own. She cannot do it, she is finding it difficult to, but this man keeps making her do it again and again and she listens to him. He is calling the shots here. This was the first time it dawned on me that this person directed her and the film. He is a director.

Director Raj Khosla was your first employer; what did you learn from him?
MB: I still remember what he said to me when he saw some books in my hand on cinema: 'You read a lot!' And he added, 'You obviously want to be a director someday. After you see a film and return, try and write the screenplay of the film you saw. All the

After you see a film and return, try and write the screenplay of the film you saw. All the scenes you can remember in order of the screenplay one after the other. Each scene in just one. And if you can recall the scenes, that means it's a good story. It's a good screenplay. If you don't

remember it, something is wrong with it.

scenes you can remember in order of the screenplay one after the other. Each scene in just one line. And if you can recall the scenes, that means it's a good story. It's a good screenplay. If you don't remember the scenes, something is wrong with it. For example, it's a good song if you listen to it once and you can hum it. You don't have to listen to it twenty times just to hum it. A good song, a good script will settle comfortably into your consciousness. So, you should do this. Whenever you see a film, come back and try and remember it as it played out on-screen and write it down.' That is something I will never forget.

The other thing that has stayed with me is when he said to me, 'Look, get a good song and if there is no situation, create a situation for one, because ours is a country where music is the major adornment. I'm not talking about the alternative cinema. I'm talking about our kind of cinema where we make films to make money.' This too stuck with me: 'Get at least one good song.' A good song gives you a spin ball. A good film backed by a good musical score takes your film to another level completely.

Today, film schools have proliferated. What is your opinion about film schools, and the education, experiences and skills they can provide?

Having said that, the film-making syllabus can become your albatross because I've always said this to film institutes, wherever I've gone to lecture their students, that institutions polish pebbles and dim diamonds. Learning film-making takes away your uniqueness.

MB: I think film schools are important to get focus, to learn certain skills passed down by the masters. Having said that, the film-making syllabus can become your albatross because I've always said this at film institutes, wherever I've gone to lecture their students, that institutions polish pebbles and dim diamonds. Learning film-making can take away your uniqueness. Like, if you go to a school of poetry, they will teach you but why should you emulate other poets? Yes, to read them, to connect with human emotions is understandable, but when they become references to imitate, to duplicate, you do it at the cost of your own self, your uniqueness. Which is exactly what will make you a film-maker. And that uniqueness is what art is all about. Students can learn craft from film schools. But the craft should be a

servant to your ideas. Because those ideas must be yours, however absurd or far-fetched they may seem to the world. So, film schools can take away from you. They can make you part of the herd. All great work has been created by the people who have stood outside. Picasso comes and rejects the entire school of painting but after his life becomes a model himself. What you really require for movies is emotional literacy, and not just film schools.

You have given first breaks to many directors. Beyond a good script, what are you really looking for in a new director?
MB: There is a feeling that there's some kind of energy in their body that travels to you. It's like something is locked in them. You feel that if you just tap it, it'd come out. You feel there is a frozen space in that person and it just needs a ray of sunlight. And that will awaken the waterfall in them. And that is what I do. When I see

You can teach a person to play a guitar. You can teach a film-maker, you can give them all the education, all the history of their craft, you can teach him or her all about technique but there'll be something missing, something that arrives like a storm. An illiterate person without any cinematic background, any education, might say something outstanding. That is the intuitive understanding of the craft of cinema.

somebody who is talented, I just awaken her vitality. The rest is easy. So, the real mentor or teacher has to gather the right seeds and leave them in the care of earth. *Baki kaam zameen karti hai, aur hawa, paani, dhoop*.

You can teach a person to play a guitar. You can teach a film-maker, you can give them all the education, all the history of their craft, you can teach him or her all about technique but there'll be something missing, something that arrives like a storm. An illiterate person without any cinematic background, any education, might say something outstanding. That is the intuitive understanding of the craft of cinema.

What are actors looking for when a director approaches them to do their film?
MB: (*Thinks*) To answer this (*looks inside his bag and removes a letter*), let me tell you about a letter I received from Sanjay Dutt. He wrote to

me from Yerwada jail. He said (*reads out aloud from the letter*), '…I can still remember now, while we were shooting a scene in *Naam*, the scene outside the house. You kept on saying to me again and again with every cut, "Sanju, no! I don't want you to play all these people you have in your head. Characters you must have read about or seen in other films or in your life. I want you to play you! Just be yourself. I want you to be Sanju. Not the actor Sanjay Dutt." It was difficult for me to understand what you were saying but your persistence transformed me to what I am and I want to thank you for that, Bhatt Saab.'

Now, Sanju is saying that I helped him become him. Because he was playing other people, while I told him, 'No! You play yourself. I don't want you to act.' So an actor wants to arrive at what they think is the real face of the character, and they feel that the director will help them reach there. Actually, what actors look for in a director is the hope that he will take them to a hidden treasure, which lies within them.

It was only when I made Ajay Devgn perform in *Zakhm* that he discovered he had a tremendous reservoir of emotions, and that made him into a National Award–winning actor. He became a transformed individual after that experience as actor. So, I think actors look for someone to whom they can surrender, somebody they can trust. It's a very intimate relationship.

Do you audition actors? What is your process of casting an actor?
MB: I never audition anybody. I just look at him or her and know whether he or she can do that role or not. And then I will work with whatever limitations I discover in the process of trusting my instinct. If I discover I am working with a mediocre actor, the mediocrity becomes a tool for me. I play with that. You work around an actor, you compensate for his shortcomings. You make him do what he is good at, instead of making him do what he cannot. You never make him feel that he is missing something you need. Then even a so-called mediocre person will perform at a higher level. That person has to accessible by the director to achieve that.

So can one describe what makes a good director, in reference to directing actors?
MB: A director's job is to see that everybody works at their peak efficiency. And for that matter, in a good film the director is invisible. The presence of a director is a sign of a bad film. That's why in a great film, you feel actors are doing it all. They are in charge. I feel if anybody comes out of a film praising a director, the picture has flopped. They must come out praising the actors. They should come

back from a film praising the character. When you look back at great films, you will remember some moments, you don't remember the direction.

Like a good poem puts you in touch with yourself, not in touch with the poet. The poet is supposed to be invisible; same for the director of a film.

When you direct films, do you prefer to direct from next to the camera, or do you prefer directing from the video-assist?
MB: I cannot be at the video-assist. I come from the space next to the camera. I have to be in that space, close to the actors and camera to feel that energy circuit. There's a field, a creative magnetic field of the frame. So when you arrange a shot, there's a frame and that frame has a life of its own and I have to be close to that. That's my space. I can view the action within that, I can't view that from a distance.

There are generally two viewpoints on how much actors need to know to play their part right: actors need to know everything vs actors don't need to know everything.
MB: Actors need not know everything. However, a feeling of uncertainty is required in good communication. You are talking to me and I notice a feeling of uncertainty in your expression because you don't know what my next sentence is going to be. And if you did not have this uncertain expression all along, I would know you were acting and not being honest to the questions you were asking because somehow you already knew what my answers were going to be. Which would kill the enthusiasm in me to reply to your questions. In a way, I feed off the subtle uncertainty in this kind of communication.

So, I think, you need to give the actors only the basic information about the scene and their character to get the best out of them. At times, it is also important to lie to the actor and get a competitive response. However, I think each director has his own strategy of working with a particular actor. There can't be any general rule. They are individuals. Each one responds differently, each one has his own strengths and weaknesses and emotional core. As a director, you need to give a dose of medicine specific to each person.

Is the knowledge of budgeting very important for a director, even though it is primarily a job of the producer?

I keep telling directors who keep fantasizing about an ideal state where money would not strangle their artistic

flight that it is an absurd dream. Even the womb is a limited space and the birth of a child happens within that limited space. Even the dance of life takes place in a limited space.

MB: I keep telling directors who keep fantasizing about an ideal state where money would not strangle their artistic flight that it is an absurd dream. Even the womb is a limited space and the birth of a child happens within that limited space. Even the dance of life takes place in a limited space. No being is given multiple wombs from where to create an offspring. That is the reference for the limited amount a director can spend on creating the world of his or her film.

As a director, do you promise more than you can deliver?

Well, see, most times a film-maker will promise more than what he or she can deliver.

MB: Well, see, most times a film-maker will promise more than what he or she can deliver. They always say, 'Think before you leap'. But I just leap. And wherever I am is because of that.

I keep on telling this great incident from my life that happened when I was in the sixth standard. We were bored and the teacher asked us, 'Can anybody tell us a story?' The idea of going there on the stage and commanding everyone's attention was so attractive to me that I raised my hand and volunteered.

I climbed up to the platform next to the teacher and that is when I saw all the students looking at me. My classmates and friends, who had just packed their bags because the period was about to end, they were looking up at me with great attention. And I remember, I said with all the gusto, 'Twenty thousand leagues under the sea!' I had seen a poster of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954). I had not seen the film. But that made an impact, I realized, because now I had the attention of my class. But I didn't know the story, yet I made up the next lines: 'Once upon a time there was a man, who was hated by everyone.' And then I stopped because I did not have the next sentence, no idea how to take the story forward and my mind was racing ahead of itself trying to create the next sentence. But fortunately for me, the school bell rang. Everyone got up to leave and some came up to me and told me, 'We'll hear it next time.'

And I tried this later in life when I did not have a story to tell but

the bell did not ring, people came to hear me and I got brickbats. But whenever I had a story to tell, they sat down and listened and they embraced me. So, if you get there, on a stage to tell a story, you better have a story to tell. You better have a story to tell which you believe in. Otherwise just don't get there.

In a business where it is so difficult to hear a 'yes', how easy or difficult is it to stand up and say no to something when anyone else in your place will be tempted to say yes?

MB: Very important. See, all the films I made which will be considered path-breaking films in my obituary are films for which I stood my ground irrespective of what my producers or the industry advised me. They are films where I refused to change the climax or the game. During *Arth*, I refused to make Shabana return to her husband or her boyfriend. I felt she should realize she would be far happier alone. In *Saaransh*, I said no to the mighty Tarachand Barjatya who was the patriarch of Rajshree Productions. I told him, 'I will not change my script to suggest the baby is a reincarnation of his dead son. There is nothing like reincarnation.' And Tarachand ji was so angry with me, 'So you know more than the saints and sages of India?' And I said, 'No! But this is what my belief is and I will stick to it.'

So, whether it was *Saaransh* or *Arth* or even the last film I directed, *Zakhm*, which won me a National Award and gave me some dignity, I always stuck to my beliefs. At that time many people advised me not to make a film like *Zakhm* because the party at the Centre and the state had strong right-wing views, though in India there was no such pure right-wing view. Yet I made it.

So, I think if I take away this rebellion from me, there is nothing in me.

You had once said that you learnt from your cinematographer Pravin Bhatt's tranquillity and sanity. Why are these desired virtues in a cinematographer?

You, the director, may imagine and write what you want, but it is the cinematographer who has to finally put the camera and shoot in the real world. He is like the government; the political parties can be visionaries, but the government has to deliver through the structures that are available. So a

cameraman is like that. He funnels the passion of the film-maker. The cinematographer is like a mother on the set. She knows what can be done for her child and what cannot be done.

MB: You, the director, may imagine and write what you want, but it is the cinematographer who has to finally place the camera and shoot in the real world. He is like the government; the political parties can be visionaries, but the government has to deliver through the structures that are available. So a cameraman is like that. He funnels the passion of the film-maker. The cinematographer is like a mother on the set. She knows what can be done for her child and what cannot be done.

Any director, however good, is incomplete, inadequate; just like any human being. A cinematographer compensates for you if you don't have something.

There is one question that some new directors get foxed by: 'Where should I place the camera?' Is that something to really worry about?

MB: No, I think it is overrated. I mean, I don't think that a director who sees a scene in his mind's eye will worry about where he or she should place the camera. If you have clarity of thought, you know what you are saying and why you are saying it, it is very clear where you can place the camera. Cinema is a concrete visual medium. So there's nothing abstract about it. Yes, there are various possibilities of the scene, how the scene can open, etc. But I don't think that has ever been a problem for a reasonably good director.

What is your usual process of working with your art director or production designer?

MB: Well, an art director would be the production designer too. I mean, the idea of a production designer has not yet come properly to our business. The art directors work very closely with me to create the mould of my world. The art director is one of the most important player along with the cameramen. So it's a trimurti: art director, director and the cameraman. These are the three aces that make the film whatever it is. The art director's choice of location is a big contribution he or she makes to the narrative.

Who was the editor of your first film?

MB: Waman was the editor. Waman and Guru became a team later. Waman began independently in the film I assisted, Do Raaste. I first ran into him when I was the production manager and I saw in him a dedication which was unusual. He was a man of tremendous integrity.

What was unique about him was that he would not leave anything to his assistants.

When I began directing, I had a chaotic way of functioning. Of course we did not have the luxury of overshooting, because we did not have money, and film stock was a rare commodity then. We remember in those days directors had one finger on the camera switch while directing and, immediately after the shot was over, they would stop the camera themselves, instead of waiting for another person to cut it. Such was the importance of raw film. Waman brought order to my vibrant mind and would often deliver to me an enhanced version of my own scene.

What does an editor really bring to the table for a director?
MB: It is very difficult to articulate what it is that an editor brings to the director, to a film. I would say, the job of an editor is to make the director see that the film he or she has in mind and the film that is shot are two different things. What the editor is seeing on cold celluloid is, or can be, something quite different from what the director intended and started with. So the primary task of the editor is to make the director realize that what they have in the edit is not what the director thought he had captured.

And unless the producer can afford to reshoot or do additional shooting, they now have to work within the parameters of the given material, and try and rise to the level of the original concept that the director had. Sometimes the editor succeeds but most of the times it is difficult, for the director is unable to grasp the perspective being offered by his editor.

Another significant contribution the editor brings to the table is that he or she gives the film the correct pace. This significant knowledge was imparted to me by the great director Hrishikesh Mukherjee. There was a film of mine which received a National Award and the editor was a rank newcomer and amateur, so I edited the film myself.

I asked Hrishi-da, who was the chairman of the jury and who had been an editor before he became a director, 'Sir, how did you decide to give this film the best award for editing? What were the technical reasons behind your decision?' He replied, 'The tempo; for the rhythm and pacing of the film. To me your film came across one with a tempo and rhythm suitable for the narrative it had and that is what I awarded. I do not care whether it was edited by you or your editor.'

Another important thing, an editor can destroy the film completely if he or she allows the director to get away with being in love with what he shot. The director may have to part with even the best shots and best scenes for an overall impact.

You have made so many movies; is the first day usually like hell or heaven?
MB: I dread it every time. However, in spite of the dread, when the moment comes it seems you were born to be in that place. (*Smiles*)

Pedro Almodóvar, the Spanish film-maker, has said, 'Every time I make a film I wish to God I had a magic wand that could turn me into a first-time film-maker all over again.' In your opinion, why would anybody want to become a first-time film-maker all over again, especially when he or she has already made several films?
MB: Because the new film-maker has something that an experienced film-maker does not have. He has the enthusiasm of a child and a sense of discovery. When he or she loses that sense of discovery, he or she becomes efficient but loses its stimulating quality. That is why first-time film-makers are awake and have a wakeful quality to their films.

The new film-maker has something that an experienced film-maker does not have. He has the enthusiasm of a child and a sense of discovery.

An established film-maker is a person who is walking on that planet for the nth time, so it is a familiar world, and he or she knows films and has decided what he or she wants; 'wakefulness' is what I would say a first-time film-maker has.

Do you think direction can physically and mentally exhaust a person?
MB: No! A good film leaves you invigorated. It is only when you are dishonest with yourself and make films for the wrong reasons that you feel dissipated. I long for the mornings when I am making a film and wait like a lover waits for the dawn to break so that he can rush to his beloved. Going to the set is like going to meet your beloved.

But there have been days when I have hated waking up and going to the set. I chose to do those films for the wrong reasons, in hindsight. And so the same thing can give you intoxicating highs and fulfilment, and it can also become a nightmare. No one placed a gun to your head, intimidated or threatened you to accept the leadership of that ship. I would say a director cannot pass the buck. The director is an architect of the entire product that is going to be viewed by the public. You are a participant in that crookery if you are making a film you don't want to make.

You need to be a brave person to be a director. And it is a very lonely profession because you put it all there, everything you have

emotionally and intellectually, and turn the wheel and you don't know where and when it will stop and whether you're going to win or lose.

Is film-making a journey or a destination for you?
MB: In film-making there is no destination. Life has no full stops. You cannot sum up life, neither as a film-maker nor as a human being. No matter how great you think you are as a film-maker, no matter how much you have contributed to the profession, film-making is an endless journey. Great giants have come and gone and they are not even mentioned today.

Philosophically speaking, the one thing that is certain is oblivion. Certain students of history may pull out your body of work for their own reasons, and re-examine your work. That's about it. But there is no finishing point in life or the arts.

All I can say is that this is my story and I rest my story and I must get out of the path so that others may come and resume from where I left. Others moved out of the way for me and I will leave the path for those who arrive after me.

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Is there something you want to share with the readers of this interview, or with today's generation?
MB: Demolish Mahesh Bhatt. He is a myth. His song is his song alone, it is unique because he sang it and he had the guts to sing it. You create the map of your life by walking the earth on your own

Demolish Mahesh Bhatt. He is a myth. His song is his song alone, it is unique because he sang it and he had the guts to sing it. You create the map of your life by walking the earth on your own two feet. Yet, there is nowhere to go and no need of a compass. However shaky they are, you have to get up on your two feet and walk.

two feet. Yet, there is nowhere to go and no need of a compass.

However shaky they are, you have to get up on your two feet and walk.

Respect people, learn from elders, learn from film-makers before you and around you, learn from your peers, find out about what consumed the great film-makers before you, what invaded their hearts, what passions surrounded them, find out what turned them on and what made them angry, and you will discover that the very things that turned them on and frightened them are the things that turn on generations of film-makers ahead.

Human beings have remained the same for centuries, nothing has changed really, and nothing needs to change. We are connected to that original heartbeat that first echoed in the heart of the caveman. Just because you see the galaxies through powerful telescopes now that does not mean you understand them. So nothing has really changed and nothing needs to. So sing a song and gather an audience around you. Sing your song and go.

If your child walked up to you and asked you, 'Dad, I want to be a film-maker.' What advice or path would you offer him or her?
MB: A person who really wants to be a director will not go to his dad and say, 'Dad, I want to be a director.' He or she will say, 'Dad, I am becoming a director, whether you like it or not.' (*Smiles*)

PRAKASH JHA

'Art is one of the few things in our world that can stir emotions of millions, perhaps even inspire them to create. However, the inspiration for getting into the field of cinema should not come from somebody else's work but from within you.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Hip Hip Hurray (1983), *Damul* (1985), *Parinati* (1986), *Bandish* (1996), *Mrityudand* (1997), *Dil Kya Kare* (1999), *Rahul* (2001), *Gangaajal* (2003), *Apaharan* (2005), *Raajneeti* (2010), *Aarakshan* (2011), *Chakravyuh* (2012), *Satyagraha* (2013)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Bihar; wanted to be an artist; left his village in Bihar for Mumbai in 1972 to join Sir J.J. School of Art; was present during a film shooting at Juhu and decided to work as an assistant director on that very film, *Dharma* (1973), directed by Chand; did a course in film editing at the FTII, Pune; made his first documentary on tourism in Goa titled *Under the Blue* in 1975; directed his first feature film *Hip Hip Hurray* in 1983. It took him ten years from his first job as an assistant director to his first film as director.

MY TAKE

I remember meeting Prakash Jha for the first time in his office. I was introduced to him by a film-maker, Ashwini Chaudhary. I went to narrate a script to him written by another writer and I wanted to direct the film for his production company. I have a faint memory of seeing him a few years ago at my house on one or two occasions because my father was writing the lyrics for his film Dil Kya Kare (1999).

When I entered his office along with the writer, I saw it was a large hall with no partitions or walls segregating the employees and him. I could see and hear everyone in that space, and they could too. I thought to myself, 'I have not seen an office environment like this. What an open and straightforward person this man is.'

I also remember that after he heard the story from my writer, he suggested we write the third act of the story and get back to him. I

remember the incident because I realized our story was inadequate. When I began working on this book, he was among the first eleven directors I wanted to interview, and because he was starting production of his next film Chakravyuh (2012), it took me nearly ten months to meet him.

When I finally did, he was as committed to the interview as he was to his film. What stands out about him is that he has understood the business and commerce of film-making without changing his core purpose. He has managed to merge art with commerce and embrace film as a medium of change. I found him to be a true artist, someone who would listen to his instincts, no matter what, and follow his dreams.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Thank you for meeting me. I like how your first film Hip Hip Hurray begins: 'Maidaan hai saari zindagi aur khel hai saari umr ka.'*
Prakash Jha (PJ): In this film, sports becomes a medium. It's really about a bunch of adolescents who have lost their way, and how a sports teacher through discipline, hard work and teamwork brings the lost youngsters back on the course of sports and higher education.

However, *Hip Hip Hurray* was my second script. *Damul* (1985), my second film, was actually my first script. (*Smiles*)

Where were you born and where did you spend your childhood?
PJ: I was born in Bettiah, in West Champaran, Bihar. That is where I spent most of my childhood. We were a family of landowners and farmers, and that life and environment came of great use to me

I feel, the only good thing about what I am today as a person is that I have remained connected to my roots. I never left the village I grew up in; I continue to be there in my mind, I still speak with people from my village, and visit my village often.

when I was making *Damul*, as it was set in a similar space and culture. I have subconsciously incorporated in my stories things I experienced growing up.

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Was Damul born from any specific experience from your years in the village?
PJ: Damul was born from a series of experiences from my formative years in the village. The film is based on a story written by Shaiwal, a writer from Bihar. The meaning of *Damul* is 'bonded until death'. It has images and stories from my years in the village.

As a film-maker, it is not just about going back to the village or drawing from those memories. Whatever happens in my stories in terms of incidents, drama, character's truth, references, the stories I want to tell arrive to me from there. Having said that, the material is not biographical; I am a storyteller. I take stories and characters from wherever they arrive.

Where did you get your primary education? Did your school life influence you in any way?
PJ: I studied at Sainik School, Tilaiya, in Hazaribagh. I attribute my growth to the seven years I spent at this school.

You write your own films; as a child, did you write stories?
PJ: No. However, I was very interested in painting, sculpting and craft. In school, whenever they required anything crafted for a drama or any event, they would ask me to make it, whether dresses for the Shakespeare drama, or a sword and shield. I loved painting and sculpting and that is why I thought I could become a painter.

Did you grow up with any instrument of art? A musical instrument, or a camera?

Capturing images is what attracted me to film-making.

PJ: I always had a camera when I was in school. It was an Agfa Click. Later, I purchased a Yashika. Capturing images is what attracted me to film-making.

When did you realize you want to be in films?
PJ: It was when I saw a film shooting at Sun N Sand hotel at Juhu, Mumbai. The film was titled *Dharma* (1973). In 1972, I had left my home and travelled to Mumbai to study painting at the Sir J.J. School of Art. The first semester at JJ was to begin in a few months, and I needed money to pay the fees because I refused to take help from my father.

I was doing odd jobs and staying at Dahisar. In the same building lived an art director, Agha Jani, who was famous for glasswork. He

had done the glasswork in the epic *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), directed by K. Asif. One day he was going to work on a shoot at Juhu, and I asked him if I could accompany him, as I had nothing to do. He let me tag along and while he was occupied with the director of the film, I stood there watching the unit work.

I was mesmerized by the shooting. Costumes were being ironed, the camera was being laid on tracks and trolley, lights were being placed and some workers were installing a large sheet of glass through which actor Pran Saab would be diving through. My art director neighbour finished his discussions with the director and told me we had to leave. I asked him if I could stick around for a while and he did not mind and left the location. I was there until the shoot packed up.

That night when I returned home, I went and met Agha Jani and requested him to take me the next day to the same shoot because I wanted him to introduce me to the director of that film, Chand Saab, because I wanted to become his assistant. He already had twelve assistants. I was made an assistant and was paid five rupees per day, and I worked for four days because that schedule got over after four days.

Did your parents want you to be in films?
PJ: No. It was my father's dream to make me a civil service officer. Within a year, I gave up my studies and told my father I wanted to be a painter which was a huge shock to my parents. My father did not want me to become a painter, nor did he want me to go to Mumbai, so I just left home with 300 rupees on me and came to Mumbai. My father was so upset with me that I remained separated from my family for five years.

Your first job on Dharma made you realize you wanted to be in films?
PJ: I was twenty years old at that time. In the four days I worked on that film, I realized that if I continued to remain an assistant director I would never be able to become a film-maker because Chand Saab already had twelve assistants before me and many of them had been assistants for years. I was convinced that if I wanted to be a film-maker, I had to get formal training.

That is when I went to FTII, Pune, and found out that the next entrance exam was next year. I had one whole year ahead of me and I needed money not only to survive in Mumbai but also for the fees to be paid next year. I took up a job at a restaurant in Colaba managing the kitchen. My salary was Rs 300 per month.

So you chose editing because you were not qualified to enrol for the course of direction.

PJ: Yes. I had to have an intermediate qualification to join the FTII direction course, so I registered myself at K.C. College in Mumbai for sociology and history. Since I was working simultaneously I could not attend college regularly. I would bring my teachers meals from the restaurant and they would do me a favour by marking me present. I passed in second division and was qualified to appear for the FTII entrance exam and I passed it. The FTII course was of two years' duration and in that period I realized editing was the most important skill a director requires.

Why is the skill and talent of editing so important for a director?
PJ: As an editor you acquire the skill to visualize the film in advance.

You made documentaries for seven years. How did that help you as a feature film director?
PJ: My inclination to tell stories based on factual issues – issues a common person can relate to – comes from my experiences making documentaries. I am never daunted by restrictive budgets and locations. All my films have been shot like that and, strangely, I have never shot in Mumbai.

Documentaries take you right in the middle of real things, they keep me in touch with my core. Shooting real people, non-actors, is another gift documentaries have given me.

Documentaries take you right in the middle of real things, they keep me in touch with my core. Shooting real people, non-actors, is another gift documentaries have given me. Most of the film-makers I know who have dealt with issues and have worked in the area of realistic subjects have also been documentary film-makers.

Therefore, I would say documentaries give you an insight into dealing with content hands-on, and also gives an idea of visuals because when you are shooting the subject there is a lot of life surrounding the subject. Later, when you are editing, you see how it complements the subject. That is the reason I shoot most of my feature films on real locations, and try to make the ambience as realistic as possible. The crowd, setting, time, environment, all these help. It is a different experience from making features, but one where you bring in real images and create a montage of engaging stories.

You worked with real subjects for seven years making documentaries and then switched to working with actors. How do you usually communicate with actors?

PJ: Every director has his or her own way of communicating with actors. My primary method is to speak with them, as much as possible, much before we start shooting. We have several sessions, readings, even for secondary characters.

When we write a screenplay, it reflects a complete story. Therefore, all characters have to be cast accordingly. To achieve that coherence, the director has to keep feeding them information about the story, character, intention, motivation, emotion, whatever it takes to help them be the one that is in your mind. You just keep working with them and it works very well, I assure you.

Who was the producer of your first feature film?
PJ: My first feature film was produced by my friend and producer Manmohan Shetty. I met him in unusual circumstances. I used to travel abroad often then because I was making documentaries. The primary purpose was to work with foreign crew and to experience various travels. It was 1979 and I was in Germany, staying just outside Dusseldorf station. I was going to board a train when I saw Manmohan Shetty and advertising film-maker Kailash Surendranath disembark from the same train. I knew Kailash, so we stopped to talk; he introduced me to Manmohan Shetty, who owned Adlabs.

Later, when I returned to India, I used to meet Manmohan Shetty. Manmohan had already produced some films and I narrated him the story of Damul. He said it sounded good but he wasn't certain of the film getting a commercial box-office release, so he suggested we first make a mainstream film and then make Damul. That is when I evolved the story of *Hip Hip Hurray*.

While we were making *Hip Hip Huray*, I had submitted *Damul's* script to the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), and NFDC approved it. After I finished *Hip Hip Hurray*, I took a loan to become a producer to make *Damul*. Our budget was low, so we cast the film accordingly.

Do you have script rehearsals or script workshops with your actors?
PJ: I do not do script workshops; I talk individually with the actors at the pre-production stage. As a director, I need to transport all the information about the story and characters to the actors who will be reflecting them. I need to get my actor into the same groove as me, draw him or her into my story, encourage him or her to ask questions, talk to him or her beyond the frame of the picture, beyond the words in the script.

Sometimes I discuss in a group. I do around eight to ten such sessions so that they are absolutely prepared before they arrive on my set. I work on them as sincerely and seriously as I would with stars; no

hierarchy in the way I give myself to them.

Even the secondary casting in your films is outstanding. How do you audition and cast for your films?
PJ: We have data of so many actors, we see their work, their show reels; several actors have been in touch with us over the years. Even at the stage of writing, I see specific actors as my characters. When I audition anyone with or without a camera, what I am looking for is that the actor should not be acting, but living that character.

Most of the times on the set I have to tell my actors not to act. The best acting is no acting. If my actor does not comprehend the character, I will keep talking to the actor so that he or she can begin to see the character as I do. When an actor acts, he or she is using body and expressions. I don't want them to resort to that. I just want them to feel the character; the expressions and body language will follow.

When I audition, I always use scenes from the films I am auditioning. I explain the scene briefly, and give the actor a day to see how well the actors prepares.

When you direct, do you stand next to the camera or next to the video-assist?
PJ: I like to feel the real thing, so I never watch the action on the video-assist. I am a hands-on director, instructing the placement of the camera tracks and most of the times I operate the camera. I like to feel the real thing. I have a very good relationship with my cinematographers, so they do not mind me operating the camera sometimes. (*Smiles*)

When I was a documentary film-maker, I used to operate my own camera. Sachin (Sachin Kumar Krishnan) has photographed three films for me and does not mind when I operate the camera. You are the director and know exactly what you want, and you can improvise when you are shooting yourself. It is a kind of a collaborative decision actually, so the cinematographer has to be comfortable with it; when I operate the camera, Sachin keeps a keen eye on the video-assist monitor.

You have produced films for first-time directors. What is a producer primarily looking for in a new director?
PJ: If you are a first-time director looking for a break, a potential producer is looking for your passion to make a film, and faith that you will see it through. Faith is intuitive; I have not always been correct with my own intuition, but that is how it is. However, whatever be your judgement, as a producer you take a chance. Moreover, the

producer must like the script.

Considering you are an editor too, how do you treat sound in films?
PJ: Sound is a very important component of cinema. As it is we have to recreate the entire sound during post-production because it is very difficult to shoot sync sound, which lately film-makers have begun doing. When we are shooting on real location, there is so much happening around that can be captured by sound. You have to be able to compress that in a film; that is very important. I really enjoy employing Dolby Surround

I remember sounds from my days in the village and towns from my formative years, and I use them in my films. Sound helps establish the geography of a location, of a character. In a frame, or an entire scene, you may not see a train; however, the sound of the train at the right time can have the desired impact without resorting to a visual of the train.

because the technology gives me latitude.

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In the same way, silence is also an important element of sound. *Hip Hip Hurray* begins with silence and then we hear church bells ringing. The film was set in a school, it is about sports, and I wanted to introduce sounds associated with that environment to the viewer right in the beginning. Sound transports the viewer to the scene.

Have you ever refused something because it was against the kind of work you do?
PJ: I only do things I believe in. Before *Mrityudand*, I was making art movies which were no longer viable with the economy opening up and government subsidies dying. Then I started making TV serials which did not make me happy. They were popular but I knew I could do something else and better. I did not know what to do, so I took a sabbatical and returned to my parents' home in the village. I did get opportunities that I had to refuse; I had to create the work I eventually

received.

Do you storyboard your films?
PJ: I did storyboard for *Hip Hip Hurray* and *Damul*. However, I gave it up later because I realized storyboarding was binding me, restricting my imagination to only what I had thought while storyboarding; it shut me to the magic during shooting. Now I play around with elements that arrive to me on the set or location. I improvise when I shoot, so in a sense I really come alive by not limiting myself to a predetermined storyboard.

And I always shoot my films in one go so that the flow of the film is decided on the location. The scene comes alive when you start working with the actors and the camera angles, and the three-dimensional space in front of the camera is a playground for the camera and the actors. In a way, I am storyboarding all the time – when I am talking about the scenes to junior artistes or to the costume director or any other technician or crew. Eventually, when you shoot, all that is lying dormant in your subconscious comes alive.

Do you make films to raise questions or to give answers?
PJ: I make them to understand equations; human relationships, whatever they may be.

How do you decide where to place the camera?
PJ: That is intuitive. When I get to the location, I decide the way I want to cover the scene, the opening and closing, the blocking. It happens instantaneously, intuitively, organically. The relationship between a director and a cinematographer is very organic and the decision where to place the camera flows accordingly.

With the cinematographer, I usually discuss the scene on the location much before we arrive there to shoot. When I do the initial planning, along with my core assistants and production people, the cinematographer, the art director, we travel to the location three to four times before we shoot and even the smallest of details are discussed and planned at that time.

Who was the editor of your first film?
PJ: Primarily I am an editor, so I chose to be one on my films. An editor brings movement to a scene, sets the pace to tell the story. I sit back as a director after I finish shooting and step forward as an editor to see what is working and what is not working in the film. The director in me may have shot a scene but the editor in me has to pace the film correctly. So far, I have been able to maintain the objectivity an editor brings to the film.

Now I have an editor, Santosh Mandal, who has trained with me. He edits my scenes, assembles the scenes, lines up the scenes and then we sit together and go over every scene and shot in detail. As a director, I am happy to remove a scene if it does not work. It would be stupid to fall in love with my shots and scenes; it is the film which is important.

I do not edit my films these days. Santosh Mandal has been my editor for five or six films. Now he does the assembling, the chopping off, selection of shots, etc., because he has an editor's eye. By choosing not to edit his or her film, a director gets a better view of his material by getting another view. Eventually it is the decision of the director that prevails but it is important to have another perspective. Santosh joined me years ago and now he knows my style and he has developed a style of his own too, so it works well for us.

What is your process of working on the colour tone of your film, the colour palette?

PJ: We don't work on the colour palette at a singular point, or in one single discussion. It is discussed at every stage of production right from the characterization to the post-production. Depending upon the character's characteristics, we work on his or her costumes with the costume department.

If you look at *Raajneeti* you will see a coherence in costumes in terms of colours, patterns or designs. *Raajneeti* has a family, so we discussed the family's characteristics, their traits, upbringing and tastes.

I take into account whether it is a family from the middle class or a village. Or, if they have travelled the world, as these things affect what they wear and where they live. As for the colour correction during post-production, that is executed by the cameraman because I have already worked out the general colour tone of the film with him or her. I definitely see the final colour correction and hint at some correction and give my view when I feel something can be different. Nevertheless, I listen to the cinematographer if he has a good reason behind the way he sees the colour palette.

How did your first day of shoot go? What kind of scene do you prefer to shoot on the first day?

PJ: It was one of the regular scenes from the film we shot and the day went pretty well and did not seem like a first day of shoot. In addition, I never work for more than eight to nine hours. On the first day, mostly I shoot the heaviest of scenes.

In *Raajneeti*, we shot all the big crowd scenes first. It was a forty-day shooting schedule and we were well prepared, so I shot the crowd

scenes first to get them out of the way before we got into the drama later.

Can direction be physically and mentally exhausting?
PJ: When you have worked, planned, and everybody knows what you are doing, it's not very stressful. For example, we have a very compact unit, so the art director has to be aware of our requirements, and my associates keep on checking if the requirements are in place. Well ahead of time, my assistant will take me to the location to check if everything has gone according to plan. My cinematographer Sachin and I will work out the lighting pattern four days in advance and decide where the generator will be placed or how the electrical wiring will get to the set.

When I have a 7 a.m. shoot, everything is ready by midnight. You will be surprised to know that whenever we are shooting the early morning shift, the production unit begins to work at midnight. One of the reasons is we shoot mostly on real locations, so there are some spots where you can park your generator and vanity vans only when there is no vehicular and pedestrian traffic. The costume people need dedicated space to put up their dress and the cooks need space for their pantry. At midnight the streets are empty and they can mark the spots they require for setting up camp and even take additional requisite permissions before the shoot begins.

When I reach the location by 5 a.m., systems are already in place. My assistants are there by 5 to 5.30 a.m. and actors by 6.30 a.m. And I assure you that usually by 7.30 a.m. I have canned my first shot. It has never happened that I have not got my first shot by 7.30 or 8 a.m. This is possible only if you plan well in advance. I also have an advance production unit. Once the production people have set up the first shot they are free to leave my set; I have no problem with that. Because that is when they begin to plan the next day's shoot.

Is ego management another skill a director requires?
PJ: As far as work is concerned, being prepared helps a lot; the actors know exactly what is going on. You have taken their advice in advance. So 99 per cent of the times there is never a discussion on my sets. Everyone knows what has to be done.

In fact, actors will not come unprepared on my set as far as lines are concerned. We always give lines in advance. Even Mr Bachchan got his lines twenty-four hours in advance. And we never give handwritten dialogues to an actor. It is always a typed manuscript. We always have a system of call sheet. The call sheet reaches the actor every single night. Once, Arjun Rampal knocked at my door in the middle of the night and asked if he could do his lines with me and I

encouraged it.

Therefore, I do not face ego problems from my actors. Everybody understands I am the one who has put in so much, and I have already discussed and taken their views and advice and I am prepared to answer any question they may have, so there is no ego between us.

As a director, how open are you to suggestions?
PJ: I am very open to receiving suggestions. If there are others who want to add something to what I have thought, I always listen. I encourage people. I am okay with my cinematographer suggesting a different angle. If I have planned and blocked a scene and an actor may offer me a suggestion of doing it another way, it would be idiotic if I am not open to that.

As a director, is there anything else you are particular about?
PJ: I hate shooting late nights. After midnight, I begin to feel tired and the actors must also feel tired. Therefore, when we have night shifts we shoot from 7 p.m. to midnight. I never shoot beyond midnight. Your mind is best when you have rested well.

When you see your first rushes, dailies, do you fear it is not the way you had envisioned?
PJ: Just by seeing the rushes, dailies, you cannot say whether you have performed well or badly. Until you have edited the footage, cut the scene, you should not think of those things. Initially, when I see the first cut, it would be very depressing because you feel things were not working and I realized the narrative was too spread out. But now I am used to this feeling. Then you begin to chisel it and keep only the bare minimum required. Actually, you get the feel of it even when you are shooting, about how well a particular scene has worked.

Is film-making a journey or a destination?
PJ: Film-making is a journey, not a destination. When you make a film because you want to express something, the audience will pay to see your film and join in the expression you wanted to convey through the film.

However, there are so many other ways in which you could have done what you have done; you could have written a story or a novel or made paintings or written a song and created a music score to say the same thing. Everyone is trying to make his or her own path and I am sure everyone is learning how to communicate with the audience.

I can still remember the first day when I stood on the corner of Sun N Sand hotel watching the whole process of a film being made. Later, when I began to practise it, making films happened automatically,

organically. The technique and process became organic and what I wanted to express through my film and story became of paramount interest. So obviously, a lot of research, learning, thinking, scriptwriting, dialogue writing went into the process and that was more important and more powerful. The actual making of the film became enjoyable. It was never tedious for me.

Even when I am working with a crowd of 5,000 people, it is physically tiring but if you can make everyone in the frame understand what exactly you want to convey, they will give it to you and that process is enjoyable. I never take it as a challenge and I always feel as good as one feels on a continuous journey where destinations change.

If your child wants to be a film-maker, what path would you show him or her?

PJ: There is no need to show a path to anyone. No one had to show me a path for me to reach here; I saw the path meant for me. I found it. This is true for any profession you want to practise. Each of us must recognize our natural skills. You can find them by working in that field or sometimes you find them only after you have been persistent in what you are doing. One can acquire skills if one works at them over a long period.

Determination is necessary, and a realistic evaluation of yourself, and your capabilities. If my child wants to be a film-maker, I can only allow him or her to be a part of the film-making process. I am not a teacher but I can definitely answer his or her questions.

Determination is necessary, and a realistic evaluation of yourself, and your capabilities. If my child wants to be a film-maker, I can only allow him or her to be a part of the film-making process. I am not a teacher but I can definitely answer his or her questions and then leave it to him or her to grasp what they can from it.

In terms of the arts, you cannot make anybody an artist. As an artist, as a person of experience and skills, you can only answer some questions posed to you. I would have no specific advice, beyond saying that formal training definitely works for any career path you choose. However, whether you follow a trained path or not is up to you, but you must know about that path; begin to understand the language of cinema, so that then you may create your own idiom.

Would you like to share something from your experiences with today's

generation?

PJ: My advice will be the same for any career path and not just for aspiring film-makers. Art, or a work of art, is valued so much because it is a breathing, living entity surviving without aging. The film, the colours, the sounds, the images, will all remain the same as long as the film is preserved. It will never age or change and it will never give you another interpretation from what was intended by the film-maker, even though each viewer may interpret it differently. That is why art and its creation will always remain so important.

Art is one of the few things in our world that can stir emotions of millions, perhaps even inspire them to create. However, the inspiration for getting into the field of cinema should not come from somebody else's work but from within you. Then you have to align it with your thought process and move accordingly. Keep working at it, learning it, practising it, and exhibiting your work. Exhibition of art is significant because it is important to connect with the people who will view your work, because eventually all art has to have an interface. Somebody will have to be there to experience it.

As for advice, I will say, 'Listen to your heart.' If you feel strongly about something, give it a chance. Do not be overwhelmed by your insecurities, because we all experience them; I overcame mine. People walk up to me and say they have been trying to be an actor for three years. I tell them, 'It may take thirty years, do you have the patience for that?' You must have the patience of working at it, even if it takes very long for results to show.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Sachin K. Krishnan Speakes on Prakash Jha

When I am working with Prakash Jha, I feel I am able to deliver far beyond my capabilities, because only with him I share an equation wherein I execute his vision alone. Normally, with other directors, my own vision seeps into their film. Because, with them, I am able to work independently, I'm free to visually interpret their script, their shot. In the case of Prakash Jha, he arrives on set with a rigid frame of mind, and I have to fit the elements of my art, the craftsmanship and techniques of my art, into his mould. Now, fitting yourself into your director's scheme of things without your own visual interpretation, and delivering successfully is very difficult.

When I began working with Prakash Jha, I faced more than the normal problems any cinematographer faces when starting a new relationship. (*Laughs*) To the extent that every second day I felt it would be my last day on the film. (*Laughs*) However, we have shot four films together since. I can say that our teething-problem days are

over, efforts of trying to understand him are over, and now it's simply about executing his vision in the manner he sees it.

When I do a film with him, I prepare myself to do a big film at short notice. When I shot *Satyagraha*, I was informed two days before the actual shoot that we were going to shoot a scene in which the character played by Mr Bachchan was fasting and schoolkids arrived to meet him. Two days later when we reached the set, there were a thousand schoolkids on the location. (*Laughs*) It's not that he underplays his scene's requirements, or that we are not backed up ably by his production. It's just that he does not see requirements or shoots in terms of them being big or small. A shoot is a shoot, period. Working with him, I have learnt to always remain mentally prepared for larger shoots at a short notice, and I always have some equipment that may be required at a fairly short notice, like an extra-wide-angle lens, etc.

Each day when he arrives on set or location, we both are able to understand what we both need executed by way of the cinematography without detailed discussions; we are mostly on the same page when we begin the day's shoot. So blocking and staging a scene take place mutually and organically now. I am able to deliver him his vision without giving too much of my own visual interpretations, and things run smoothly on our set; I now know exactly how he would like a scene to be lit and framed from just hearing the scene from him.

On set, Prakash-ji multitasks; while I am lighting the set, he is tweaking the costume, the make-up, the art direction, the dialogue, etc. He will look into these aspects minutely. In my case at least, I feel I am almost an assistant director to him because I discuss with him the other elements of film-making too, like the story, the script, the dialogue, the art direction, etc. He readily discusses aspects of the film with me, because I am interested. Even though they are not my responsibility as a cinematographer. And I feel all those discussions help me to see his vision more clearly and surely.

One thing I would really like to find out is his diet. (*Laughs*) Because of the high level of energy he has even after shoot. I have witnessed countless times that even after a very long day of shoot, when even a younger person like me is dying to hit the bed, his physical and mental faculties are as high as they were at the beginning of the day. Amazingly self-disciplined and very focused, Prakash Jha is the sort of person one should try to be.

SANTOSH SIVAN (A.S.C.)

'Cinematography evolves so fast. Just like there is a new sunrise each day, every day a new technology arrives and that is why it is and will remain a challenging profession. Therefore, you need to remain a student, and if you do, your dedication will reflect in your work. The same holds true for film-making.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Story of Tiblu (1988), *Halo* (1996), *Malli* (1998), *The Terrorist* (1999), *Asoka* (2001), *Navarasa* (2005), *Anandabhadram* (2005), *Prarambha* (2005), *Before the Rains* (2007), *Tahaan* (2008), *Urumi* (2011), *Inam* (2014)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Kerala; assisted his photographer father, Sivan Sanganer Nair, during school and college years; graduated from FTII, Pune; directed first documentary *Story of Tiblu* in 1988; first films as cinematographer: *Nidhiyude Katha* (1986) and the Hindi film, *Raakh* (1989); first film as director: *Halo* (1996). From his first film as cinematographer to his first film as director, it took him ten years.

MY TAKE

I met Santosh at his house in Mumbai. We sat on a terrace and were surrounded by greenery, and I forgot we were right in the middle of a concrete jungle. I was fascinated by how he had created so much beauty with various shades of brown and green by using plants. There was also a deck of a sailing boat, and fishing nets which made the space seem magical, almost out of a fairy tale. What I liked about his balcony was that it was surrounded by plants and short trees. After the interview, I wanted to gift him a potted plant to add to the natural beauty we were enveloped by on his open terrace; and I did send him one the same day, which he happily and gracefully accepted. When I met him after a gap of three years to record his video promo, he told me, 'I still have the plant you gifted me. It's beautiful.' And he smiled. I was so touched that he remembered my humble gift. When I got up to leave, I made it a point to shake his hand, clasping it warmly with both my palms to convey my immense affection for him.

Rakesh Bakshi: *You began your profession as a photographer, what are your thoughts on photography.*
Santosh Sivan (SS): For someone who has no professional background in cinematography but is fascinated with visuals, still photography is the best way to begin. Still photography is a journey that begins when a person is exposed to a camera for the first time. Make time to experiment with it. Discover its beauty in your own way, at your own pace instead of learning it the professional way. You are your best teacher.

Tell us your thoughts on cinematography.
SS: Cinematography is an extension of photography. It is relatively easier for a photographer to become a cinematographer because his basic perceptions are in tune. Visual art is best learnt through self-discovery. I have always had great respect and admiration for the earlier generation of cinematographers who laid the foundation for seeing the world poetically, in terms of light and shadow.

Let us rewind to your formative years. Where were you born?
SS: I was born in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala in 1962. Most of my childhood and schooling was in Kerala. My school was in the city, and during holidays we would go to Haripad, my village, where we would celebrate all kinds of colourful festivals.

When do you think you noticed that light falls differently at different times and locations?
SS: As a child, I would play hockey and Kerala is a place where the rains are unpredictable. As the youngest amongst the players, it was my job to stand on the highest terrace and keep a lookout for rain. (*Laughs*) Therefore, every day, for many months after school, while my friends played hockey, I was on a terrace looking at the sky. (*Laughs*) And I had to warn my friends if I thought it was going to rain. In those afternoons of watching the sky, I think I learnt to observe how the light changed if it was going to rain, or if it was going to be misty or foggy; so that's where I learnt about light.

Interestingly, many years later, when I was directing *Asoka* (2001), whenever I predicted mist was going to arrive, it would. (*Laughs*) Unknowingly, I think standing on that terrace and watching the sky, I had learnt to study the changes in light. While on the lookout for rain, I also observed how magical it all looks when a streak of sunlight suddenly streams

challenging and beautiful things, especially those created by light and clouds and time of the day, are transitory and ephemeral, which is why I have to work very fast during those fleeting and mortal moments.

through dark clouds.

Many years later when I shot a documentary on Kerala tourism, I could use those changes in light because I had grown up with them. These moments do not last long, like dawn and dusk. I feel the most challenging and beautiful things, especially those created by light and clouds and time of the day, are transitory and ephemeral, which is why I have to work very fast during those fleeting and mortal moments.

During your childhood, what were your experiences in the village in terms of dance, music and culture?

SS: My village was very interesting because everyone was involved in some activity or the other. My cousins had to learn to play the tabla in the morning. They also learnt the mridangam. More than the mridangam, I was fascinated by the music teacher. (*Laughs*) He was very old, and he would cycle all over the village with a mridangam tied behind his bicycle. Every day he would ask us what was being cooked for meals.

One day, my friends and I, just for some fun, took the teacher's bicycle and hung it on a tree and announced that his bicycle had committed suicide. We did not know the implications of suicide. For the first time as a child, I must have been eleven, I saw a man shriek and cry, and collapse unconscious on the ground. Many years later, we gifted him a pension meant for unrecognized musicians and artistes.

What I loved about my village was that it was full of stories.

Did any of these stories make their way into the films you wrote and directed?

SS: Most of the films I've made are from what I learnt during school, or what I had heard or experienced in my village, or later while working on films.

My first film *Halo* was born from an experience while shooting *Raakh* (1989), an Aamir Khan film I shot for Aditya Bhattacharya. It was my first Hindi film as a cinematographer. It was also the time I began living here. I used to stay in Aditya's house at Bandra. Aditya

had a younger sister, Anvesha, who was the age of Sasha, the child character in Halo. One day her dog got lost and she moved heaven and hell to find her. (*Laughs*) That incident inspired my first feature film Halo. (*Smiles*)

Your father was a photographer. What do you think you learnt by being around him?

SS: One day I got into trouble when I cut up some of my father's beautiful pictures and put them up on the walls of my room. (*Laughs*) My father taught photography to many people in the village, but he had a strange way of teaching. There were many framed pictures in our house. A series of pictures of Gandhi-ji in black and white, some my father had shot. He would ask his students and me to clean the picture frames twice a week. After a while, he would ask something about those pictures to judge whether we cleaned them without observing and studying them. Many of his students would leave because they did not realize he was not really asking them to clean those pictures for dust. They did not pause to think my father was testing if they were observing the photograph whose frames they were cleaning. When I was in school, I told my father I wanted to take pictures. I was young so I was allowed to help but not take pictures. One day there was a photo shoot scheduled at the girls' school, and I was hoping that the photographer my father would send to the school would not show up. If he did not show up there would be no option but to send me to take the pictures of the girls and I was hoping these to be group pictures. (*Laughs*) Those days we would use the camera in which the image of the subject appeared upside down through the viewfinder.

The photographer did not turn up and I went in his place. I was so happy. (*Laughs*) All the girls were giggling and I was trying to do something fancy with the camera using filters and all. Later, when my father saw the picture I had taken, he said it was nice because I used a filter. Therefore, I learnt everything by sudden opportunities and by making mistakes, but I never thought of it as a career.

While my father clicked passport pictures, I was more interested in knowing why the photograph was being taken or what the purpose of their journey was.

I also found it interesting to take pictures for passports. It's like sketching portraits. While my father clicked passport pictures, I was more interested in knowing why the photograph was being taken or what the purpose of their journey was. Once, someone was getting his

passport picture taken and I asked him if I could shoot his profile. He refused. The person explained that because his ear was a bit bent, he did not want that deformity

I believe people want their photographs because they want to be remembered, in addition to being seen in a certain manner.

to be seen. I believe people want their photographs because they want to be remembered, in addition to being seen in a certain manner. One subject wanted to wear a coat while taking a passport picture to look prosperous.

I learnt a lot by simply being present and observing. I was fascinated because the moment the subjects were in front of the camera, they would tweak their expressions, or comb their hair, powder their face, or not blink at all, or not smile, or smile too widely. It had a lot of magic because everyone in front of the camera would have to smile, and not blink.

My father would not really talk about his work, but if I asked him something about photography, he always answered. I can say now that my father became my guru without me realizing it.

You consider yourself a student even today?
SS: Cinematography evolves so fast. Just like there is a new sunrise each day, every day a new technology arrives and that is why it is and will remain a challenging profession. Therefore, you need to remain a student, and if you do, your dedication will reflect in your work. The same holds true for film-making.

There was a wonderful dialogue in your film Tahaan, 'Maqsad bina zindagi ka koi wajood nahin hota.' What was your childhood dream?
SS: I did not have an idea what I wanted to do with my life. (*Laughs*) When I decided to go to FTII, Pune, I just wanted to shoot some nice black-and-white movies, that's it. I did not know what more I could do in life with film education. Before that, I had read some book which said: 'You should do what you love doing, then you will be happy working.' I realized I should do something where I had to travel because I would be happy travelling.

When you travel and you shoot pictures, you gain experience by observing things. You realize the hostility of weather in some places and how light changes its shades in different places. By photographing, filming places you travel to, you make others experience them from your unique perspective. Like a film director does.

When you were a photographer, did you ever wonder how films were made?
SS: How they make a particular kind of cinema was something I would wonder all the time. (*Laughs*) However, I had a fair idea of how movies were made, because I was always around when my father would take pictures and develop them.

Before you joined FTII, did you get to photograph or direct a video, since your father was a documentary film-maker and had a photo studio?
SS: I was very young, the Super 8 cameras had just arrived in the market and my father had one. There was a Shivakashi wedding in Chennai, which meant a big wedding with many fireworks in the sky. Many big studios in Chennai were also covering the wedding, and my father thought it was time to use the newly arrived Super 8 camera. For the first time he gave me the Canon Super 8 camera and asked me to shoot the wedding. I was very young but I was eager to do it.

I shot that wedding differently. I would shoot the decorators preparing flower arrangements, then cut to shots of women with different hair buns, then cut to the people preparing the flower arrangements. I evolved my own style without realizing it.

Do you mean your work has a signature to it?
SS: Everyone leaves a signature on their work, just like a painter. Even though Stanley Kubrick makes varied films, there is a consistency to his work.

Is still photography the beginning step for moving images, cinematography?
SS: Still photography and cinematography are two different things. Still photography in the right way is beautiful where the relationship is solely between you and the still image. It is more personal than cinematography.

Still photography in the right way is beautiful where the relationship is solely between you and the still image. It is more personal than cinematography.

As for cinematography, the purpose of it is altogether different. I am in awe of people who do still photography. I am not talking about commercial still photography, but those photographers who treat still photography like an art form. I like to spend time with them. I also love to spend time with painters. Actually, painters are like still photographers.

What do you think you had in you that helped you succeed in this profession?

SS: I enjoyed what I did as a photographer, documentary film-maker and a cinematographer. I have always believed that if I do not enjoy the work I should not be there. That is one reason I do not take on too much work. I like material comfort, but not at the cost of peace of mind. I want to enjoy my work. I want to earn things beyond money. My house or my car may not always belong to me. Everything can go someday; even I will not exist someday. However, if I write a book, make a film, make a painting, it will remain forever.

Therefore, when I make a film I borrow a lot from my own experiences so that I can bring myself into it. Even if I am making a remake of an earlier film, I use elements from my life which will make the remake unique and thus perhaps original. Even though I believe nothing is really original. Everything has an origin, and for me that origin should be from within me, or at least from my own experience; then only it will be original to me.

You were doing very well as a cinematographer, what prompted you to turn to direction?

SS: While I was thinking of directing my first feature film, I got many opportunities to shoot other films as a cinematographer, for which I would have also been paid very well but I refused them.

I loved making *Halo* even though I went through hell to make it. I had to borrow money for pre-production because the Children's Film Society of India (CFSI) does not fund you like regular film producers or banks. I sacrificed a lot to make it at that time, as I feared if I did not make it then, I never would.

Who was the producer of your first film, and how did you get them to be on board?

SS: Children's Film Society India produced my film. However, their approach is different from other private production companies. Nevertheless, it is not as difficult as you may think. Especially for students graduating from FTII, or for anyone who wants to make a film. Organizations like CFSI are run by people who recognize passionate and good film-makers. If you have someone, say, Mrs Jaya Bachchan, heading CFSI, you can meet her quite easily and narrate your story, as she is the one who will take the decision. They are in a position where they can do many things for you if they like your script and appreciate your talent. Of course, CFSI did not then have a great network to market the film, but at least the film could be made. I do not think the journey to make a film is very difficult.

In my case, I wrote the script of *Halo* and sent it to them. They liked it and asked me how much it would cost, and if I was willing to invest some funds in my own film. I agreed. You do not have to fund it, but only to invest to fund it, and then they would reimburse you. I signed a few films as a cinematographer and got advance money. I had a fantastic bunch of kids with very eager parents and they were all very good to me. All this helped me make my first film.

You have worked a lot with child actors. What has been your experience?
SS: We did not have permission to shoot on the roads, so we had to be quick and get out of the location before the authorities spotted us. There was no time for more than one take or any discussions on performance during the shoot. So I did rehearsals with the children before the shooting; but you also have to flow with them.

One great thing about kids, which adult actors should learn from, is that kids have no inhibitions about how they look. They are only concerned with what they are supposed to do. So you should keep them excited and motivated. Children like to offer suggestions and I would always listen to them as they think out of the box. This one child would look in the camera and act, so I changed the script and made him look into the camera and say, 'Someone is watching us.'

Tell us how important it is for actors to be comfortable with the cinematographer?
SS: It is important that actors are comfortable with the cinematographer because most of the time the actors' apprehensions arise from their sense of insecurity about their appearance. So it is necessary for me as a cinematographer to make the actors feel secure in front of the camera. Make them believe my camera is their best friend whom they can trust. This is one of the methods to make an actor look more beautiful and thus encourage him to give a better performance.

When you were making Halo, did you wish that you had more knowledge about any particular aspect of film-making?
SS: I felt that about every aspect of film-making! (*Laughs*) I always wished I knew more. When you make a film, you feel everything is going wrong. However, you should not get worried about it, things fall in place eventually and you also learn on the job.

Your first day of shoot, what scene was it? Did the shoot go well?
SS: The first day of shoot for Halo was terrible. The location was Bandstand. Director Basu Bhattacharya-ji gave the clap. It was raining so much that everything got wet, including the camera. We shot a

couple of shots of the children singing a song, and then we had to pack up. Finally, we had to reshoot that scene some other day, but we kept just one shot from the first day. The reason we had chosen this location and time was that it was convenient for production. We did not have permission to shoot on the road and no one was present on this road, so we decided to shoot there. However, things went terribly wrong because of the rain. (*Laughs*)

You were the writer, the director and the cinematographer of your first film. How do you create a balance?
SS: I actually never switched hats. And I was shooting without a video-assist monitor. Since I was the cinematographer, only I knew which lens was on, and what the frame was looking like. And because I was also the director, I was the only person who knew what the audience was going to see. So the director in me and the cinematographer in me would constantly ask each other if what we were viewing was okay. (*Smiles*)

I gained this habit from shooting and directing *The Story of Tiblu*, my first documentary. Therefore, I don't see it as a separate thing. Nevertheless, it has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that when you are shooting a film you can make a small-budget film seem big-scale without really spending much.

The minus point is that sometimes you are happy with a shot as a cinematographer but unhappy with it as a director. You miss someone who can offer you a second opinion. Not for the shooting job, but you miss the healthy interaction that happens between the director and the cinematographer. But again, you can go ahead and take the shot you want without having to consult the director of photography, so no time is wasted in interactions when you don't want any.

Can direction be a mentally and physically exhausting profession?
SS: The working hours are not only very long but also unpredictable. Nevertheless, the exhaustion disappears when you see your rushes, or first cut. It disappears on seeing the result of your work. The journey is the most interesting thing about film-making. No one in the world can take away the forty-five or maybe sixty days that you travel as a director.

Some aspiring directors, who do not have connections in the business when they are starting out, wonder if they can make it in the business without a godfather, or whatever. They fear their

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interesting and enjoyable because the cycle can take you down paths no car or plane has been to before.

journey is going to be a hard one. I say, even a tough journey can be enjoyable if you make it interesting for yourself. If you have to travel by a cycle while others are travelling in a car or a plane, your journey can still be interesting and enjoyable because the cycle can take you down paths no car or plane has been to before. Moreover, no one else would have travelled that path before but you, so your experiences can not only be enjoyable, but also unique. If you can put your journey down as a story and make that into a film, it will be different from anything seen before. You offer that difference to your viewers as a director.

Does a director also have to manage egos?
SS: Actors and crew are very important, and everyone has an opinion. If I arrive and instruct straightaway where I want the camera, or what I want the actors to do without any discussion, they're not going to take very kindly to it. (*Smiles*) So the approach for actors should be, 'These are the lines, the characters, what would you like to do? How would you do it?' If the actor thinks differently and can convince you, go with it. If not, try to convince the actor to see your point of view. You should give them a chance to speak, whether it is your actor or cameraman. Listen to their opinions, then ego will not enter the set.

I was shooting *Before the Rains* in England, and I had actors from Hollywood, from England and from India. In England you need to first line up the shot, which means the actors will come on set before make-up, and rehearse the scene fully and only then will they go for make-up. In addition, while the actors are doing their make-up, the cinematographer will execute lighting. It can be different in India.

Therefore, everyone is used to his or her own methods. It is up to you as a director to understand that they are different and treat them accordingly. If they are suggesting something to you, do not think it is their ego speaking. Therefore, you allow them to be individuals because you have to work as a team.

You made your first film on a very low budget. Tell us something about making films on very low budgets.
SS: A low-budget film has to begin with the conviction that the film must be made and the film-maker has to be obsessed with his ideas to give it form, shape and body irrespective of the budget. The crew must be small but highly motivated and enthusiastic. Necessity is the

mother of invention. You have to be really sharp and know what exactly you are looking for because it is very easy to lose direction midway.

After making so many films, do you wish to be a first-time film-maker again?
SS: I think it is a very interesting question. I made Halo when I saved up Rs 5 lakh and approached CFSI for funding. Today, I have the best lights and camera equipment at my disposal, yet I long to make my next film like a first-time director. I try to think of every film as my first time as a director and you can have the same purity that you once had. When you started, you knew why you made your first film. Follow the same process for your next. Think of the real reason behind the next one and where it is coming from.

Is film-making a journey or a destination?
SS: Film-making is a journey that has to be experienced with passion. There is no destination. It is like when you are growing up some things matter to you, and after you grow up, the same things do not matter any more. What is important now, or what affects you now, may be different from what will be important to you in the future. So things that matter now, do them with passion.

Film-making is a journey that has to be experienced with passion. There is no destination. It is like when you are growing up some things matter to you, and after you grow up, the same things do not matter any more. What is important now, or what affects you now, may be different from what will be important to you in the future.

As long as you are pursuing something that is interesting to you, it doesn't matter whether you make a feature film or a documentary, or a series of still photographs. Being engaged by it is more important than thinking of the result. For example, when I make a documentary in Kerala, I go back to my roots and pick up many different things, so it is not about the destination but the journey.

If someday your child tells you that he or she wants to be a film-maker, what will be your advice?
SS: I will be very happy. I have many friends who are in films, and

they have older children who are already asking me for advice. I ask them, 'Are you doing it because your parents are successful in this field? Everyone has a purpose in life, and if you think being in films is your purpose, go ahead and do what you need to do.' I would not dictate terms to them. They have to discover it themselves. Our experiences can never be the same.

When I was growing up, at 7 p.m. the power would go off and we would be made to sleep. Today children watch films at midnight. The life I have lived is different from what my son is living. Therefore, I would not like to advise him from my experiences, I would love it if he goes and makes the discoveries himself.

How important is it for a new director to make short films?
SS: Making a short film helps you a lot. It helps you realize what it is that you want to do, and how to communicate what you want to say. And it helps when people respond to your film.

Making a short film helps you get a taste of things, a taste of what your work means or can mean to other people. As a film-maker, if you're looking to please the masses, you'll never reach anywhere. So you should make your first feature film the way you want to make it.

Considering you understand both cinematography and direction, what are you looking for in a new director when he approaches you to work as a cinematographer?
SS: Whether the director is experienced or new, I want to learn new things from him and the work I am going to do with him on his film. When I am shooting as a cinematographer, I'm looking to bring in the director's spirit and his passion, and I am not looking for what the director can do for me, or what I can impose on his film. I want to find out from the director what he is passionate about.

When a new director tells you the story he wants to make, it takes less than two minutes to know if he's seen it somewhere, or if he's telling a story from his own life. Today, thanks to the Internet, anyone can read up a good story, and narrate it like it's his own. But it takes less than two minutes to know if you've written it, or if it's borrowed, and the kind of attachment you have with it.

When I worked with M.F. Husain on *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities* (2004), he told me, 'Santosh, these peacocks are very interesting, I want to shoot them on this road in Prague.' There are many beautiful roads in Prague, but he wanted a particular road because he had already seen it in his mind. When I worked with Mani Ratnam, if I asked him about something, he explained the source of the scene. Therefore, I knew it was born in his mind.

When I made Terrorist, I made sure the character wore a shirt

belonging to a real terrorist. That had an emotional effect on the actor. I used something inspired from life. I got the shirt from a terrorist I had met during my research and that made the story real for me. These are some of the ways a director can make his story, scene or characters real for himself, and for his actors and his cinematographers.

Would you like to share some advice about career or life with the young readers of this book?

SS: Firstly, you have to believe in yourself. If you do not believe in what you want to do, no one is going to believe in you. Discouragement and frustration are bound to surface every now

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and then. Let them. You know what's best for you. Your experiences are your best teachers. You have to be convinced that this is what you want your life to be. Whatever problems others might create for you on your chosen path, try to build on them and do not build a wall from it.

I will tell you about an incident in Andhra Pradesh while I was shooting *The Story of Tiblu*. One day while we were in the thick forest, the path tracker, a tribal, looked very worried after seeing something on the ground. He began to whisper something in the ears of his friends and then all of them looked worried. I asked them what the matter was, and they said the tracker had seen fresh footprints of a tiger. I was petrified and asked them what we should do if we saw the tiger? They advised me, 'Run very fast and climb the tallest tree because tigers cannot jump high.' They could see I was very worried. I said, 'We better go and climb the tree right away, because I do not know if I can run fast and climb a tree too.' The tracker said, 'No problem sir, when you see a tiger, you will learn how to run very fast, and you will also learn how to climb a tree very fast!' This is what I kept in mind when I met John Malkovich, when I made *Terrorist*. I just jumped into the project without knowing anything about terrorism. I learnt to run and climb along the way. (*Smiles*)

Another lesson I learnt was when I followed the route of the great river Brahmaputra: the deeper and wider the roots, the more

Not everything in life is visible and that everything has mystery. If you see a tree, its roots are

hidden. A baby in the womb has gone through an entire life in the womb and the mystery of its earlier life, its hidden lifetime, is always there.

value a tree had for the people who live there, because that tree would not get washed away. I now understand that it is our roots that will anchor us and help us survive when emotional storms hit us like flood hit trees. I also feel that not everything in life is visible and that everything has mystery. If you see a tree, its roots are hidden. A baby in the womb has gone through an entire life in the womb and the mystery of its earlier life, its hidden lifetime, is always there. We are just not conscious or aware of it. That is the kind of understanding I attempt to bring to my work. And last but not the least, I would like to tell any student of photography, cinematograpy, direction, or any artistic field: Worship light. (*Smiles*).

SUBHASH GHAI

'A thought should consist of three integral elements to inspire me: Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. It should be honest, beautiful and have a divinity in itself, irrespective of the subject of the film, whether it be a crime thriller or an adventure film, a social or political film; that is how I construct a story.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Kalicharan (1976), *Vishwanath* (1978), *Gautam Govinda* (1979), *Karz* (1980), *Krodhi* (1981), *Vidhaata* (1982), *Hero* (1983), *Meri Jung* (1985), *Karma* (1986), *Ram Lakhan* (1989), *Saudagar* (1991), *Khalnayak* (1993), *Pardes* (1997), *Taal* (1999), *Yaadein* (2001), *Kisna: The Warrior Poet* (2005), *Black & White* (2008), *Yuvvraaj* (2008), *Kaanchi* (2013)

SNEAK PEEK

Born in Nagpur, brought up in Nagpur and Delhi; studied commerce at Rohtak and acting at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, in 1966. Small roles in films *Taqdeer* and *Aradhana* followed by lead roles in *Umang, Bharat Ke Shaheed* and *Gumrah*. Wrote his first film *Akhiri Daku* for Prakash Mehra; offered to direct his own script *Kalicharan* by producer N.N. Sippy in 1975. He is also the chairman of a global film school known as Whistling Woods International. It was a journey of nine years from his graduation from FTII to his first film as a director.

MY TAKE

I was introduced to Mr Ghai by my father. He told Mr Ghai, 'This is my son Rakesh, I think he writes quite well and I know he is hardworking. Give him a job as an assistant director with you. If he does not work well, does not live up to your expectations, you can get rid of him.'

While working on the sets of *Yaadein* as an assistant director, I made an error on the sets during shoot. I did not double check what I had ordered for the shoot. That day, Mr Ghai shouted at me from the mike in front of the entire unit, including the stars of the film. I cried that evening, and swore it would never happen again. A few months

later, Mr Ghai appreciated my work in front of the same unit on the same live mike. Even though the stars were not there that day, I felt proud because my star was always my director. Stars may not belong to their unit, but a director always does.

One of the best advices Mr Ghai gave me was, 'When you pray to God or to the universe, and if you ask for a great career for yourself, always ask for an optimum balance of good career and family. One is futile without the other. In fact, you need both in a good balance for a happy life.'

On a personal note I can say that Mr Ghai is someone who, long after the movie is done and the audience have left, has been there for my father, for me, and our family. Sometimes as a friend, at times as family. And I am aware he is like that for many other people whom he has worked with.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Please share with us some of your memories of growing up.*

Subhash Ghai (SG): When you talk about life and its influences that get etched on our minds and hearts, I have lived a happy and colourful but also a very grave life. Both happiness and adversity have shadowed my life from the very beginning.

My life is like the tide of the ocean, it rises and falls. I have experienced a variety of contrasting circumstances, a rainbow of emotions, along with long periods of monochrome.

My life is like the tide of the ocean, it rises and falls. I have experienced a variety of contrasting circumstances, a rainbow of emotions, along with long periods of monochrome. I can say I have lived quite a full life. There is no colour that I have not experienced. When I became a film-maker and wrote stories, I subconsciously incorporated these experiences in my stories and films, along with my culture, dreams and unrequited aspirations. A lot of my writing and film-making are related to my life's varied experiences and observations and the feelings those ocean of emotions have evoked in me.

Tell us about your formative years.

SG: My well-educated family migrated from Pakistan in 1947 and went through financial and emotional crisis in Delhi. I was born in Nagpur. My maternal grandparents took care of me since my birth, and admitted me to Bishop School when I was three. My father, a

dentist, started his practice in old Delhi. When I was seven, I was called to live in the shabby environment of old Delhi which was full of refugees. I had to study in a Hindi-medium school named Sanatan Dharam Higher Secondary School at Delhi-6.

I remember being very happy living in my lawyer grandfather's seven-bedroom house in Nagpur with my uncle and two aunties, which was full of music and art. We were all very close-knit and they taught me good values and manners. My mom, a graduate in Hindi, was in Delhi supporting my father in his crisis. I was fortunate in the sense that I experienced both shades of life from very early on, one vivid and beautiful and another stark black-and-white on the streets of Chandni Chowk and Ajmeri Gate.

Your films are also appreciated for their music; were you introduced to music during childhood?
SG: When I was around four or five, living in Nagpur, my mother would take me to the Arya Samaj Temple. That is where I heard bhajans for the first time. I could not understand the preaching, so naturally my attention shifted to the music; I would watch the bhajan performers with utmost interest, and pay special attention to the tabla player. You can say I was definitely affected, influenced by those religious songs and music.

What are your memories of the emotional transition from your grandfather's house to your father's?
SG: At the age of seven, one fine day I was told to leave my grandfather's house and go live with my father in Delhi. I didn't know what status meant until then; I soon learnt it and that too overnight. (*Pauses*) From seven luxurious bedrooms in Nagpur, I

When you are so young, you do not realize that your status has fallen, that you have zoomed from the top to bottom. I was grappling emotionally, trying to come to terms with the abrupt, unexpected change in the people around me.

suddenly found myself in an old Delhi house with just a tin roof. When you are so young, you do not realize that your status has fallen, that you have zoomed from the top to bottom. I was grappling emotionally, trying to come to terms with the abrupt, unexpected

change in the people around me.

It was only when I began attending a municipal school from standard fourth that I realized the children around me were completely different from the ones I had interacted with in my earlier school in Nagpur. This is where my life, I believe, became very serious, without me even knowing what serious meant. However, I liked being with these children, and soon I began enjoy their companionship as much as I had enjoyed my friends' in my earlier convent school. I was in a better school from standard fifth, called Sanatan Dharam Higher Secondary School, with students from all classes of society. I started loving it as I was asked by a teacher to participate in drama and music.

Did this transition from Nagpur to Delhi, in any way, influence your decision to become a film-maker decades later?
SG: I believe it did. Though I loved being in school with my friends, I was under emotional turmoil at home. I saw my parents fighting with each other. They were not made for each other. It impacted me severely, because I had never seen anything like that at my grandfather's place. It would scare me.

The first thing that scarred me was a question for which no one had any answer: 'Why did my parents fight so much with each other? Why cannot they simply speak nicely to each other?' The answers never arrived. (*Pauses*) When they would fight, I did not understand their arguments and banter. I did not know how to react, what to do or how to stop them. That period was one of the biggest challenges of my life; it was an immense emotional struggle, and, of course, there was always a bit of financial struggle too, and together, these problems overwhelmed me. The struggle of adjusting to the fall in status, the humiliation of belonging to a lower status, everything negative one can think of shadowed my childhood and early youth. There was no escape.

Did you look for an escape through art?
SG: I think the love I had for music saved me from drowning emotionally. Music gradually and unknowingly grew into a passion. In my school, we had a dance and music class. I escaped into dance and music; it must have been a just world for others, for me it became my universe. I sang as well. I was attracted to art, music, dance and drama, so the teachers who were fond of the arts adored me. I began receiving love and encouragement, which I did not feel I got at home. The two months of summer vacation would be a period of bliss for me because I would spend all my time on the performing arts. It was as though there was heaven on one side, at school, and pure hell on the

other side, at home. Not that my parents did not love me, but their constant bickering and fighting made my life unbearable.

In hindsight, my life back then which I thought was sad and boring proved to be a huge asset for me. Those emotionally challenging times, I think, increased and improved my sensitivity to relationships, emotional needs of human existence and happiness.

In hindsight, my life back then which I thought was sad and boring proved to be a huge asset for me. Those emotionally challenging times, I think, increased and improved my sensitivity to relationships, emotional needs of human existence and happiness. Failed relationships and my low-income status made me aware of some dark social truths that lurk behind the façade of our society.

However, it was music that saved me. Cinema was my great escape from the realities of life. Whenever there would be an argument between my parents, I went to watch a movie alone or with friends. I started to enjoy drama and music in films. Nandlal's *Anarkali* (1953) played for a year and a half at Excelsior Talkies in Delhi; I watched that movie so many times that later I stood outside the hall just to enjoy the soundtrack of the film, as the sound seeped through the half-open doors. Soon, while standing outside hearing the soundtrack of films I had already seen, I began to imagine the visuals playing inside. And I discovered that it was a great way to enjoy the films I had seen without spending any money on them again. (*Laughs*) But I think somewhere it may have sharpened my visualization skills.

Your films are very emotional. Any particular event from your life that has shaped the highly emotional writer and director in you?
SG: Yes. The biggest pain I suffered was at the age of fourteen, when my mother told me she was going to divorce my father. I was devastated to know that they would not be together and I might not see her again. I remember accompanying her to the New Delhi railway station when she was leaving for Nagpur to live with her parents. On the railway platform that day, my mother gave me the most valuable lesson of life. She told me to be the best in whatever I did in life and help others, so that others would help me, and to stand strong in the face of all crises.

Most significantly, she confessed to me that the reason she let me stay with my father was so that someday I would grow up to be a man, the kind the world would admire. She made me understand that

living with adversity and financial challenges would make me the man she wanted me to become. She said, 'Son, if I take you to Nagpur, nothing good will come out, you will just remain a protected child. So, you need to be here and live with your father, go through this long, dark tunnel that I am leaving you in, despite the unconditional love every mother has for her child. I admit it is dark today, but if you have the strength to keep walking, the courage to believe, the faith to keep hope alive, I promise you that one day you will finally arrive at the end of this dark tunnel. I promise you the light of your success ahead will be a light brighter than the sunlight you now know.'

As I saw the train disappearing from my sight gradually, I was too stunned and numb to appreciate or understand her words or her heart-wrenching decision of leaving me behind with my father. Not that I did not love my father, but I loved my mother more and could not fathom why she left me behind. Thereafter, I only communicated with my mother through letters except during summer vacations. She was great at expressing her emotions in letters. She was a great writer and would write long letters guiding me about the essence of life. I also used to reply to her emotionally. And that's probably how I developed the art of writing about human feelings and philosophy. In hindsight, I know she taught me great things. Her words expressed good values, character strength, and spiritual and life teachings.

My father catered to all our financial needs, but I suffered emotional depravity because, after my mother left us, my father remarried. It was tough for me to adjust and somewhere I didn't like the fact that my father had moved on from my mother. It took me many decades to realize my father had a right to move on with his life after my mother walked out.

Did your father know about your dream to be in cinema? What was your father's dream for you?

SG: My father wanted me to be a chartered accountant. However, fortunately, my principal from Vaish College, Rohtak, bumped into him. He told my father and I quote, 'Subhash is very talented and gifted and he has brought a lot of glory to our college in drama, music and the performing arts.' My father was shocked. He told my principal, 'I am not aware of this side of my son, I haven't encouraged him, and now I have set up an interview for him in Delhi for a job with a chartered accountant!'

Next day he called me to his clinic and asked me, 'Now tell me, what you want to be in life? You are already a commerce graduate, so how do you want to take your career ahead?'

I replied, 'I want to be in the movies.'

He thought about it and asked me, 'Do you know anybody in the

film business, any friends or relatives in Bombay, who can help you if you go there to look for work? How would you go and live there, when you do not even know a clerk of any film production house there?'

I replied sarcastically, 'True, I agree I do not know anybody in Bombay, but I want to be in films.'

My father pointed at a newspaper lying right in front of him, I think he had placed it there intentionally, and said, 'Read what is written here.' I read it. It read something like, 'The Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, invites applications from applicants aspiring to be actors.' My father said, 'If you want to work in the film industry, see to it that you go there as a graduate of film, or a graduate of acting. Go as a person formally trained in that field, so that they respect you when you arrive there looking for work, respect you for your formal education in that field, and offer you at least a cup of tea during your interview.'

It is in that moment, I now believe, my father became my angel. Because he showed me a path to my future in films, even though he was unable to express his love in words, in expressions or by touch. However, he advised me to first graduate in the film course and then go to Mumbai to try my luck in the film industry. He had immense love for me which he occasionally showed but it was his faith and belief in me that made me the writer and director I am today.

Tell us about your FTII years, your growth there as a film student.
SG: It was a new point in my journey after living in Haryana and old Delhi, and I was jolted when I was introduced to the cinema of European film-makers like Godard and Fellini, names I had never heard of and movies I had never seen. I was a fan of David Lean, Bimal Roy, Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor. These names were absent from the list of respected film-makers at FTII, which was based on the Russian film school model. Anyway, I had to accept this hard task because of my aim of getting into Mumbai's film industry, rather than with an understanding of the importance of a film training school. I applied for direction and acting. During my Punjab University days in Rohtak, I used to write, direct and act in plays during my college time. My plays were very popular. I would participate in everything, whether it was story, composition, choreography, dance, or drama.

At FTII, I found myself being interested in editing, and the sound department would call me to provide all kinds of sound effects as I could create a variety of sounds from my mouth. (*Laughs*) The legend Ritwik Ghatak, a contemporary of Satyajit Ray, was appointed as the vice-principal of the institute, and he was upfront, outspoken and fearless. Government bosses hated him but we loved him, and soon we

became good friends. I became his fan immediately and got close to him. I must admit that it was from him that I learnt the importance of sound, image composition, editing and lighting. He was a master craftsman and a great teacher.

I loved his films, even though I wanted to get into Hindi mainstream cinema.

After FTII, did you get your first break in cinema as an actor, or as an assistant director?

SG: My FTII diploma was in acting, and I had planned that I would first establish myself as an actor and then look at the possibility of direction, because I had also been directing plays during my college years and had loved the experience. At FTII, I took more interest in technical aspects than in my acting classes. Cinema technique fascinated me more than acting, in which I was a gold medallist in my university days.

After my graduation from FTII, I came to Bombay to pursue my dreams. I participated in a Filmfare-United Producers acting contest, and was selected as one of the three contestants along with Rajesh Khanna. My struggle to be an actor went on for another year. Though my father had encouraged me to study film at FTII, he had warned me that if I failed to become an actor in a year or two, I should return to Delhi. I stayed with my affectionate aunt in Bandra East but her family was apprehensive of my dream to be a star. I didn't know anyone in the industry, not even a studio gateman, but somehow a few producers like B.R. Chopra, Subhodh Mukerjee and Nasir Hussain did meet me and encouraged me to stay and have patience till I got the right opportunity. They told me that I was talented but they couldn't help me much. My mother's words, 'Stand stronger in crises' kept resonating inside me and I started reading motivational books from my cousin's bookshelf. I refused to go back and started accepting small roles in Rajshri Productions' *Taqdeer* and Shakti Samanta's *Aradhana*. I faced my fellow contestant Rajesh Khanna as a star. I smiled at my destiny and became more determined to fight the odds.

My small role in *Aradhana* was appreciated by the audience and I got an offer to play one of the lead role in Guru Dutt Films' *Umang* which again got me appreciation. After that, I was offered lead roles but not by big producers. I started shooting as leading man on sets for three films titled *Bharat Ke Shaheed*, *Gumrah* and a Punjabi film *Sherni*. But I was never happy with the style and content of these films. I was very uncomfortable and was unable to perform the scene with conviction. There had always been a writer and director in me since my college years, so I would judge the material I was performing. Looking back, I realize that I was not born to be a professional actor,

primarily because I was always interested in the content part. If that didn't live up to my expectations, I wasn't able to perform well. I realized later that a professional actor has to deliver and perform with conviction without judging the content. But I also realized that an actor speaks lines written by writers and presented by directors. That is empty art for me. I was disconnected from this art and therefore I failed. Later, I wrote best of the characters for my actors and all of them were highly appreciated.

Before you became a writer and director, did you have any jobs that involved writing?
SG: While I was seeking work as an actor, I went to meet the legendary producer, Mr L.V. Prasad. He told me he would cast me in a film someday, but that project did not take off. He asked me what I did when I was not acting and I replied that I was a habitual reader of novels and wrote stories when I had the time. He asked me to join his company as a writing assistant. I agreed, thinking that I might get a role as an actor in his movie.

I went to meet his writer Mr M.G. Dave who was eighty-two years old. I was shocked to know he had written more than 200 films since the 1930s, including silent films. I joined him, and would reach his house at Vile Parle at 5.30 a.m. He would narrate the scenes to me and I would write them down and then rush to Mr L.V. Prasad and his writers' team to give them a narration of the scenes. I would observe them when they would discuss the writing and other related issues in the film. In those six months as Mr Dave's assistant, I learnt the texture of screenplay writing and the art of storytelling on screen.

How did you get your first film as director?
SG: Shatrughan was a star villain then, and I had narrated the story of *Kalicharan* to him. *Kalicharan* was the first story I had written. He did not like the story. Anyway, I went ahead with my story partner B.B. Bhalla to sell other stories to various producers and we were successful. At one point a big producer, N.N. Sippy, called me and asked me to narrate a story for his production. I told him that I did not have any new story except the one which had been rejected by many. He insisted and I narrated the story of Kalicharan, which impressed him. Much to my shock, he assigned me to direct the film.

That was a turning point for me. I was no one's assistant but he developed faith in me while I was narrating my full script to him. He was impressed by my passion and the way I treated every scene and character in the script. And a time came when Mr Sippy went to Shatrughan Sinha, who had rejected the story, and told him that he

had signed me as a director with the script of *Kalicharan*. Shatrughan immediately endorsed my talent and agreed to work in the movie. I was pleasantly surprised by his gesture as a friend and we are still friends.

How did you manage, considering you had never been an assistant?
SG: I was definitely nervous. I had never handled a film camera, I wondered how I would execute the direction. I thought it all out. I knew I had a good imagination, considering I was the writer as well. I knew from my brief experience as an actor and as an assistant writer with Mr L.V. Prasad that a director has a team of technicians and craftsmen that helps him execute his work. I decided to put one in place for myself.

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could rewrite the screenplay and dialogues, because I needed their talent and objectivity. As a director, I did not want to be obsessive about my writing.

Another question that arose in my mind then was how I would photograph it. K.K. Mahajan was an established cinematographer by then and he was my friend from our FTII days. I approached him and said, 'I know you photograph arty movies for Mrinal Sen, but I am making a commercial mainstream film. Will you stand by me and photograph my first film, because I have no understanding of camera techniques and lens. I do not want to be exposed on the sets of my first film as a naïve technician. But I can assure you, I have a very good imagination and I can describe very well to you how I see my scenes and film. But you will help me in picking up the right lens and lighting for the shot I compose.' The film was made exactly as I had imagined it and was a big hit. The rest is history.

You have written almost every film you have directed and they are known

for their powerful writing. Share with us how one can develop a story.
SG: As a director, thought is the first element in film-making. You gradually travel on the path building your thought into a motion picture and it is a very long journey. The concept, the idea of a story always comes to me from a single thought. The thought either

As a director, thought is the first element in film-making. You gradually travel on the path building your thought into a motion picture and it is a very long journey.

inspires you, or bothers you, nibbles at you, and you pick up on the thought and you think, 'Is it a good idea to make a movie or try to write a story on this thought?'

This thought can come from a variety of sources: magazines, newspapers, television, play, people, works of art, paintings, photographs, elements of nature, the rain, some can come from challenges and problems you face. Some thoughts you try to forget but they keep returning to your mind and they kind of haunt you. First, you work on it in your mind. You may reject it in a few days, if the thought cannot sustain itself. In that sense, you keep on working on various thoughts that occur to you.

Then you wonder, 'If it keeps returning, is it inspiring me?' Some other things you wonder are, 'Does it suit my temperament?' because this thought has to match with my inner personality and endeavours. A thought should consist of three integral elements to inspire me: Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram. It should be honest, beautiful and have a divinity in itself, irrespective of the subject of the film, whether it be a crime thriller or an adventure film, a social or political film; that is how I construct a story.

The thought which resulted in me writing *Karz* (1980) came after I watched the film *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* (1975). Honestly, I did not understand it much because it employed the French style of editing and screenplay. After four or five days, a scene from the film kept playing in my mind. The scene was when Peter, after his reincarnation, goes to his mother's house from his previous birth and his mother somehow knows Peter, her dead son, has arrived. She begins to murmur, 'Peter is back, Peter is back!' Everyone around her wonders why and how she could say that because her son died two decades ago. Only the viewer knew Peter has reincarnated.

That made me think, 'Just imagine if I die today leaving behind a lot of wealth for my family, and if I have a rebirth and come across my family and children from my previous birth and have a memory of my previous birth, only to see my family suffering financially and

emotionally, I would be very curious to know what happened to my family after my death!' This thought kept returning to me and I felt it as a very powerful emotion, the possibility of seeing the future of my family a couple of decades after I die. That was the progression of my thought. I decided I would not see that movie again because I did not want it to influence my writing. Then I travelled to Ooty and I started working on that same thought.

Then you start constructing the story. While doing that I ask myself if I can tell my story in five minutes. I do all this consciously, so I always ask my writers to narrate the story to me or to someone else in a few lines. When writers approach me with their script, to sell me a script, I tell them I am more interested in their synopsis than their script. In a way, I am going back to their thought behind the story.

I write my own story in about ten lines and I keep rereading it; it helps me get the potential out, how much can I play here with this situation and characters. The screenplay writer has a great role to play here as I believe he is like the creator. He plays with the characters in his writing. He will incorporate everything he knows of their world in his world, so I consider the screenplay writer as the author of the script. Writing does not mean only putting your thoughts on paper with a pen; it means thinking, thinking of the characters and their world and playing with the various possibilities inherent in that world.

Whether it is my art director or music directors, I narrate the script to them. I do not give them the script as it might come across as cold text because of the way I write a script. I then keep creating the script through its production, right until the remixing stage. Once you have the screenplay, the basic interaction between the characters, and the time, space and locations decided, comes the stage of writing the dialogues. Every character will speak his or her own language, language in sync with their character.

A director is primarily a technician because he or she reads the script and executes it by using image, sound and performance. Therefore, even if the director is not the writer of the script, he directs and is therefore the author of the film.

Tell us about how you choose a writer or a co-writer for your thought or story.

After Mr N.N. Sippy told me I was directing his film, I thought to myself that now I had to forget that I had written the script. Because now the director will

overtake the scriptwriter in me, and their thoughts should not collide.

SG: After Mr N.N. Sippy told me I was directing his film, I thought to myself that now I had to forget that I had written the script. Because now the director will overtake the scriptwriter in me, and their thoughts should not collide. The director looks at a script with images, and not words alone, and eventually with sound, editing, music, colours, etc.

So I asked Mr Sippy, 'Sir, can you do me a favour? I want a dialogue writer and a scriptwriter for my film.' He asked me, 'What are you saying, the script you narrated to me is complete.' I replied, 'It is, but since you have given me the chair of a director too, I would like to ensure that I do not make a mistake. Therefore, I want two writers to keep me in check, guide me and point me in the right direction. The director has such supreme power that he may destroy the whole thing unintentionally. I want contribution from some professional writers.'

Thus, he employed writer Ram Kelkar for my film as co-writer on screenplay, and Jainendra Jain, who was the dialogue writer of *Raj Kapoor's Bobby* (1973), to rewrite dialogues if and as required by me. I have always had co-writers in all my films to give me their own perceptions and point out my mistakes. I am not God and I can go wrong. There should be one person with you when you make a film who should be able to criticize you and not get bogged down by your status or success, 'Mr Ghai, you are going wrong here, what you have written here cannot or should not happen.' That gives me confirmation and strength to know what I am thinking is right or wrong.

A co-writer does not necessarily write. A co-writer can be a co-thinker. You may bounce your ideas off him and he or she can bounce his off you. Writing has to be interactive for me, a conversation with others.

How would you describe the relationship of a cinematographer and a director? Which of your films do you feel were shot in a manner that took you by surprise, revealed something new to you through cinematography?
SG: Once Ritwik Ghatak told me, 'When you go to a cinema hall to view a film, you see it because someone photographed it to begin with. As a director, the cinematographer is the first person with whom you share your story, so that he can execute it in the same manner. The cinematographer is your prime technician.'

Technically, I think Kamlakar Rao shot *Karz* (1980) brilliantly. I was very impressed by Ashok Mehta when I saw the rushes of *Ram Lakhan* (1989). I could see a revolutionary change in my own films

after he photographed them. That was the first time I realized the importance of having a creative cameraman. By creative I mean someone who would decorate the frame like an artist paints a painting. He worked both like an art director and a cameraman.

Is directing an actor a skill that can be acquired by a person?
SG: Yes. Firstly, directors are not supposed to tell actors how to act. He or she can ask the actor to understand the subtext of the script and make changes in his attitude or raise or lower his pitch or show him an action and help him improvise the scene. As for me, I am a director who has a command over his actors. In the sense, I want my actors to stick to what I need, the way it's written. If I have sustained for forty years as a director, made nineteen films and all my actors have prime performances in my films, it is because there is a trained actor in me. I know, from my own experiences of being an actor, what my actors demand from me to give me their best. This is one of my biggest assets as a director, I think.

Do you normally conduct script rehearsal workshops with your actors during pre-production?
SG: I tell them the story and screenplay in detail. Then I send them a brief character description of about two pages. Then I tell them their physical characteristics, how they walk and speak, not imitating but describing their nuances. I have noticed one thing that when I express the complexity of the character to them, the actors surrender themselves to me, and then I can mould them the way I see them in my script. That helps me on the set. Anil Kapoor is the perfect example. His performances have been outstanding in my films, and he is one actor who willingly imitates me when I direct his performance. He would always tell me, 'Sir, I am going to surrender myself to you. I am going to do whatever you ask me to do.' Of course, every actor is different and needs to be tackled differently, but most of them voluntarily surrender themselves to me. Every actor has to be treated differently by the director. Dilip Kumar always listened to me carefully when I would read a scene in front of him. He would give me three to four renditions of his lines in the shot. In my experience, he is the best actor in India.

Do you stand next to the camera while directing, or do you prefer the video-assist monitor?
SG: When there is a key scene, I always direct from near the camera. Because I want to look in the eyes of the actor. Everything is conveyed best through their eyes and the nearer I am to their eyes, the better I can judge their performance. Some actors like it if I am in close

proximity to them when they are performing and it helps them do better, whereas some give their best performance even if I am far away at the video-assist monitor. Every actor has his or her own methods and preferences.

Who was the editor of your first film?
SG: Waman and Guru, and they remained with me for all my films till *Khalnayak* (1993). They would suggest to me which scenes were not contributing to the story and should be deleted. Transition from one scene to the next is another great thing I learnt from them. They would always insist on the importance of taking reaction shots of the characters. Shots of what one has heard or seen, so that the impact of what is being heard or seen is conveyed without dialogue to the audience.

When I changed my editor from Waman and Guru to Renu Saluja in *Pardes*, I realized the importance of having a contemporary editor. She surprised me by changing the perspective of the climax from Shah Rukh's point of view to Mahima's. She told me, 'Don't get swayed by Shah Rukh the star, see the climax from the point of view of the heroine.' That's what editors really bring on the table for a director: their perspective to the director's work and the film.

There's one thing I must mention. With the advent of digital cameras, where the cost of raw stock does not really weigh on your mind, a director can tend to overshoot. In the past, when I shot film stock, normally I would shoot at a ratio of 1/6 or 1/3 of footage. However now while shooting digital, I shot a ratio of 1/50 to 100. When I was in the edit of my last film *Kanchi*, I got terribly confused about what to keep, because I had shot beyond my instinct. I had shots from various angles and lost my perspective during the edit. I ruined my film, I think, by overshooting.

On the first day of shooting, do you begin with something easy or something challenging?
SG: I always get into a film slowly. I think I should not come from the sky but rather go towards it. It helps me understand my actors, how they speak the dialogues, their body language, their costume and the sets, everything begins to come into sharper focus as the day and the schedule progresses. You can say I treat the first two to three days of shoot like a workshop. I get to know my unit and they get to know me, before we dive into the challenging scenes and shoots. On the first day of shoot of my first film *Kalicharan*, I was confident of the script and my ability to make the actors give their best. The pressure I faced was how to convince my producer that I know my job well. (*Laughs*)

You founded a global film school, Whistling Woods International; can you share with us anecdotes from your film-making career and life that you have shared with the students over the years?

SG: I always tell students that one thing no film school can give you are your personal traits including the talent you possess within. A film education can give you best facilities, tools, teachers, knowledge, environment, connections, communications with celebrities but not your wisdom, your own philosophy or attitude towards life. These are traits which evolve within you from the kind of life you live before and after film studies.

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But at Whistling Woods, we try our best to give you the opportunity to evolve, grow and rediscover yourself as an artist and a human. We teach our students to learn, to unlearn and to relearn by discovering yourself and connecting with others with compassion. As a student, the first thing you must learn about yourself are your strengths and shortcomings. Be aware of everything around you, including your own reaction to your surroundings. To build a stronger and sustainable career, inner growth is as important as external growth.

I struggled for nearly seven years after I passed out from FTII, Pune. It took me many more years to understand how one can possibly become a film-maker. Many people tell me that film students consider themselves as film-makers with attitude. It is harmful. You do not become a film-maker because of your diploma or degree, or by making a couple of short films. The real education begins once you step out of film school and look for jobs with film-makers. In fact, it takes many years to make films and at least three scripts or films to begin calling yourself a director. When you are looking for a job as an assistant director, cinematographer, etc. they may not even see your diploma. You are lucky if your potential employer watches your diploma film or any other short films you made at film school. Diploma films are meant mostly for you to discover your strengths and weaknesses as a film-maker, and improve your interpersonal skills. Also, they help you deal with various people with whom you need to

interact with as a film-maker. The most important thing while studying in film schools is your attitude towards the education you receive. The diploma will serve you best if you accept you are learning film-making to discover your strengths and weaknesses.

This is a people's business. You must know how to deal intelligently and empathetically with people. People of all levels, not just above, but even those at par, or below you. There will always be someone in your way, someone difficult or challenging to deal with, but you will have to deal with them successfully. If you have a chip on your shoulder, your nose in the air with a wrong attitude, leave it at home before you walk out. Get rid of it like you would get rid of poison. Attitude will only create enemies.

The brutal truth I have experienced is that 80 to 90 per cent of the people who graduated along with me from FTII returned to their towns, cities and villages. One huge obstacle they all faced was not hearing the song the industry was singing. If they were questioned about the nature of script or film they want to make, instead of explaining themselves clearly, expressing the reasons why they saw films the way they did, they challenged and questioned the industry with, 'Who are you to pass judgment on us? We know it all. We have seen great films by great legends of cinema, Satyajit Ray, Kurosawa, etc. So do not teach us about film-making.' I say you have seen and analysed Kurosawa but that does not mean anything until you repeatedly prove it with your own work.

I was a student of Ritwik Ghatak. So after I graduated I arrived here with fixed notions of the kind of films I wanted to make. When I saw my batch mates from FTII failing as film-makers in making

When I saw my batch mates from FTII failing as filmmakers in making the kind of films I wished to make, I realized that to survive here I had to cater to the demands of the industry.

the kind of films I wished to make, I realized that to survive here I had to cater to the demands of the industry. In that sense my first film was a clichéd crime thriller, but I adapted my sensibilities to what the industry was looking for. Thereafter, I continued to write and make films that could be commercial hits. However, everyone evolves with time, so now I will find it impossible to make a *Ram Lakhan*, a *Khalnayak* or a *Kalicharan* again. But it's important that before you begin your career in films, you arrive at an understanding of what kind of films you would like to make,

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to offer you different perspectives of how films have been made and appreciated. You need to find your own perspective of cinema, your own point of view of the world. That will define you as a filmmaker.

and it is not mandatory that they be the kind of films which have been liked and made by legendary film-makers. Films made by legends of cinema are only there to offer you different perspectives of how films have been made and appreciated. You need to find your own perspective of cinema, your own point of view of the world. That will define you as a film-maker.

In a writer, I am looking for great ideas and how he or she executes the idea as a script. In a director, I am not really interested in great ideas. I am more interested in how he will execute a simple idea into a great film. Learning things of not just your interest, but beyond. And it will not end there. Even after you graduate, and even after you have made many films, you should not stop being a student. I am still a student of cinema. You become a master only when you pass away from the world, leaving some great work behind you.

When I was in school, even though I was not great in studies, I liked most subjects except algebra. The moment I had to study algebra, I would feel sleepy or I would pray to God to take that away from my school curriculum somehow. However, as I grew up I realized the challenge of algebra never left me. It kept reappearing in one form or another, throughout my personal and professional life: in the form of a disrupted shooting schedule, a difficult actor to deal with, a tough script to crack, a challenging song situation, a difficult friend or sudden bad weather while shooting, etc. So I can say, deal with the algebras of life and do not run from them. Develop a positive personality to deal with it. Dealing with it will help you graduate in life with great honour. Love challenges, embrace the odds, fight crises at any and all times.

As you grow older, the child within you must be kept alive. However, always be friends with the wise old man who rests on your shoulder. He will keep the child in check. The child within

As you grow older, the child within you must be kept alive. However, always be friends with the wise old man who rests on your shoulder. He will keep the child in

you and the wise old man on your shoulder, should play a check and balances game for you to go about your life with balance.

In my professional life, I have never cancelled a shoot. You may not consider me modest for saying this, but this is the truth. The show must go on, with a smile. The most amazing thing is that I have always achieved a better result by carrying on regardless of things not being available to me like I had planned and sometimes it was better than what I would have possibly achieved had I got exactly what I had wanted.

To give you just one example, in *Ram Lakhan*, there is a scene where Anil Kapoor bashes up the villain in the wet mud. That scene was supposed to take place in an indoor location, like a canteen. During a shooting schedule in Ooty, it kept raining the whole day and we could not shoot a song we had scheduled. Production advised me to pack-up, because we had no scene that had to be shot in that kind of location. The rain had stopped for around thirty to forty-five minutes. Not one to waste production money or cling to what is scripted or scheduled, I decided to shoot Anil Kapoor's scene right there. I told the cinematographer to hold the camera and follow me, and I yelled out to the actors to follow me too, while I ran towards the open ground at that location because I had noticed that the continuous rain had created a pool of muddy water. Once the rain stopped, it created a perfect moment for me to create a mise en scène of a hand fight I had conceived in the script.

The actors and technicians were clueless about where I was leading them. When we reached the muddy pool, I instructed both Anil Kapoor and the villain to get into the muddy water. My only instruction to both was: beat the hell out of each other. Anil has to beat the hell out of the villain, and the villain has to just take the beating of his life. I can say, the muddy pool worked for us, because it helped transform an action sequence into an emotionally charged scene. Later, in the cinema hall I witnessed people clapping at that scene. It was then I realized what a blessing that washed-out day was for us. A director must always remain open to interpreting a scene or location differently than what he or she had conceived during scripting or pre-production. Embrace happenstance.

Always try to keep good company. By good company I mean, people who can contribute to your growth. By company, I also mean books, movies, the arts, not just people. And try to be spiritually strong to be happy and at peace. In film-making, the group of people who come together to make a film is called a unit and not a team. Why unit? The word has been imported from the defence services. Their units are regimental, disciplined to the extent of not questioning

the commander's orders or instructions.

In this business, the most common thing you will hear is that the director is the captain of the ship. True. But don't be under the illusion that it means you are the owner of the ship. The producer

In this business, the most common thing you will hear is that the director is the captain of the ship. True. But don't be under the illusion that it means you are the owner of the ship. The producer is the owner of the ship, and the director is the most significant technician and craftsman who delivers his ship ashore.

is the owner of the ship, and the director is the most significant technician and craftsman who delivers his ship ashore. In general terms, the producer is your employer, and you, the director, are an employee. And as an employee, it is your duty to understand your employer's resources, whether it be his access to talent or funds, and deliver the kind of film he trusts you with, within those resources.

Before going to sleep, write something. Don't finish a day without expressing something, anything, be it a poem or verse or an original quote, not necessarily a story. Write synopses of the films you watch in the cinema hall or at home. You may never read it ever again, but just write something each day. This habit may irritate you in the beginning but a few weeks down the line you will begin to enjoy this mode of expression: writing for yourself. I would also advise you to watch plays regularly. They are very rich in stories and performance.

I advise students that instead of making films from their own stories, they should make films from stories written by their classmates or adapt classics from literature into short film scripts. Find a writer who can write you a script from such stories and translate that into a film and your talent will be judged much better.

I have made many mistakes, many blunders as a film-maker but I took each of them as lessons. Make mistakes, but learn from them.

What has film-making really given you?

SG: Human love, in general. As a film-maker, I create visual stories of the human experience, and share some of my own thoughts with the world. And it is my career in films that made me capable of building a film school. I feel blessed that I am able to leave at least a legacy of film education by giving back to society and the industry which has given me so much. I really feel content at being able to set up a

platform for others. I hope the alumni will carry this flag and pass on their experiences to the next generation.

Is there something you would like to share with today's generation?
SG: The essence of life is to grow, and grow not only for yourself but for the welfare of others too. Learn to give and share whatever you have achieved and never cease to be a student of life.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Kabir Lal Speaks on Subhash Ghai

My true identity or recognition as a cinematographer of good worth was born from my association with Mr Ghai. Our relationship started with *Pardes* (1997). And it started on a bittersweet note. He rejected me after my very first shooting schedule with him. (*Laughs*)

Let me explain, after we returned from the outdoor shoot in Andhra Pradesh, Mr Ghai saw the rushes of the first schedule of Pardes and called me to say he was very disappointed. He said, I had not delivered to the promise he saw in me, nor had I lived up to the standard and style the film deserved. I was hurt, naturally. However, my instinct told me something must have gone wrong at the processing laboratory. Because I was very confident of what I had shot. I apologized and requested him to give me another chance. I would like to visit the lab and check the print myself, I told him.

Mr Ghai allowed me the chance to prove myself right. I arrived in Mumbai soon and checked the rushes at the processing lab. To my horror, I realized the timing of the print was off. I made the necessary colour corrections in the print, and immediately got Mr Ghai to view the rushes once again. Mr Ghai saw the rushes and we went on to work together on not just the next schedule of *Pardes*, but three more films, *Taal*, *Yaadein* and *Yuvraj*. Many film-makers discovered me only after films like *Pardes* and *Taal*. (*Pauses*) One good thing came from that incident during Pardes, where he rejected my very first job with him: it made me extraordinarily cautious every time I worked with him thereafter. I never wanted to let him down ever. And I carried that discipline with me to other films.

Mr Ghai helped me discover and evolve my own dynamic range as a cinematographer because of the range of the films he confidently offered me to photograph, each so different in subject and scale from another, each set in a variety of locations, each expressing such deep emotions. Such expansive work can help any cinematographer evolve.

Mr Ghai is a dedicated director. Sincere to the cause of his film, like a soldier is to his or her battalion and nation. I see Mr Ghai as a military man. (*Smiles*) The great thing about him is he can be a foot

soldier on the sets, depending on the situation, and be a brother or father too when necessary. He runs his sets with extreme clarity of mind. His sense of dedication and discipline towards his film are his great qualities.

He is a master in enhancing the visuals of his storytelling. He can express his ideas and what he is seeing in his mind so well that it helps me apply the correct camera techniques to deliver the right style and look his storytelling deserves. He knows how each and every technical and creative department works, including production and administration, so he can advise and take advice from any department as and when necessary. That makes us, his cinematographers, confident in delivering exactly what he needs. If we have any question for him, we are assured that he will have an answer, and if not, he has the openness and capacity to seek advice and make the correct choice. This latter quality in him stems from his knowledge of every department of film-making. Such a director helps us cinematographers go beyond the scope of our own skills.

Sometimes, he may not entertain any questions from me or any technician on set. Because during pre-production he meets me and answers all the questions I pose to him. So, on set he expects me, and the other technicians he has interacted with in great detail during pre-production, to arrive knowing what's not just in the script but even what's in his mind. This enhances our work with him and thus the film.

I have said that I see Mr Ghai as a military man when he is making movies. Add to that 'with a heart of gold'. (*Smiles*). He is not just a director for me. He is there for our family occasions too. He is family. In fact, his production house, Mukta Arts, has also become my family.

TIGMANSHU DHULIA

'In a long period of shooting, making films, you will meet new people, see new places, and have new experiences. You get to know these new places and people closely because you work with them, and often live with them. In that period, they may become your friends. It's similar to what happens on a journey.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Haasil (2003), *Charas* (2004), *Shagird* (2011), *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster* (2011), *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster Returns* (2013), *Bullet Raja* (2013)

SNEAK PEEK

Born in Allahabad, UP; acted in plays in school and college; studied English, economics and modern history at the Allahabad University; studied acting at the National School of Drama (NSD); also has a master's in theatre; worked as an assistant art director on Ketan Mehta's *Sardar* (1993); assistant director on Arundhati Roy and Pradip Krishen's *Electric Moon* (1992); worked as an assistant director and the casting director on Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994); wrote dialogues for Goldie Behl's *Bas Itna Sa Khwaab Hai* (2001); directed his first feature film *Haasil* in 2003. From his first job with Ketan Mehta to his first film as a director, it took him fourteen years.

MY TAKE

Displayed on Tigmanshu's office walls are vintage posters of classics from world cinema. Uncluttered and spacious, it is a space that breathes. He spoke about the challenges he overcame after the release of his second film *Charas* and before the release of *Shagird*. I thought about him on my way home and marvelled silently at his courage and his ability to survive adversities. I wish I had this courage.

Once the interview was over, he insisted that my sound assistant and I have a meal with him. During the meal, he told me about some websites where some of the greatest film-makers' lectures are available. He said it would help me with my own book. Few directors said what he did when I was leaving: 'Keep in touch, Rakesh.'

Rakesh Bakshi: *Where did you grow up, and what about that place has influenced you the most?*
Tigmanshu Dhulia (TD): I grew up in Allahabad. My grandfather was active in politics and he would read newspapers and analyse the day's stories. I got the habit of reading and analysing from him. My school, though very good, was infested with criminals and goons and there would be bomb blasts almost every day. (*Laughs*) Your ambience certainly leaves an impression.

My family would see almost every film that was released. I used to enjoy action movies and dislike social dramas. My father and I would watch many films together. If I did not understand a film, he would explain it to me in detail. The explanations I got from my dad about what we saw helped me understand the movies better.

You write your films; did you write as a child?
TD: Never.

Were films your childhood dream?
TD: I don't remember wanting to be a film-maker or even an actor. (*Pauses*) When I began playing the guitar, I wanted to be a rock star. (*Laughs*) Later, I wanted to study hotel management. My mother wanted me to study law. It was only in college that I began doing theatre. I started watching plays that came to Allahabad from other cities and it gave me an idea how theatre was beyond Allahabad. That is when I decided to study theatre professionally, and joined the National School of Drama (NSD), Delhi.

What do you love the most about theatre?
TD: The process and the teamwork. The atmosphere during rehearsals: someone is reading a script, someone is sipping tea, someone is performing a scene, someone is designing a set, someone is working out the light pattern. I loved all the discussions and the gossip too. (*Laughs*) After the rehearsals, we would sweep the floor and clean up the set because everyone works at all levels in theatre.

Did this environment encourage you to join the National School of Drama?
TD: Yes! However, before I signed up for the three-year course, my family encouraged me to visit the campus, to see closely what my life would be like for the next three years. Irrfan Khan and Mita Vashisht were acting in the first play I saw there and I liked it. It was during that play I realized the magic of theatre. The way they had executed the lighting, the set design, art direction, fascinated me. Moreover, on campus I saw boys and girls mingling freely, holding hands. (*Laughs*) I

saw women smoking cigarettes; students hanging out till 10 p.m. on campus, discussing things that interested me: the arts, acting methods, direction. There were painters on campus. I was so impressed by the liberal atmosphere. I felt if this was how each day was going to be spent here, life couldn't get better. (*Laughs*) I joined NSD to be an actor, but over the next two years, I felt I was a bad actor, so I opted to specialize in direction.

When did you realize there was an industry behind the films we saw; there were cameras, equipment, technicians, etc.?
TD: During my first year of college, a film unit producing a documentary on Indian theatre, directed by theatre and film director Jabbar Patel, arrived to shoot a film in the theatre at NSD. I was in awe of the film unit. (*Laughs*)

When did you realize what a director contributed to a film, and when did you decide to be one?

I understood it was the director who made all the difference to the way a film looked and turned out, because of the way he or she perceived things around him or her.

TD: The awareness of what a director brings to a film came to me after I began watching films directed by stalwarts like Shyam Benegal-ji and Govind Nihalani ji. It was in their films that I saw the characters I could identify and relate to. They were closer to my reality. I understood it was the director who made all the difference to the way a film looked and turned out, because of the way he or she perceived things.

Is it the NSD where the seed of cinema was sown in your mind?
TD: While I was at the NSD, I began a film club to view all kinds of films. One huge advantage of studying at the NSD is that it is located near Mandi House. All the auditoriums are located in a single block. Pragati Maidan, where film and art festivals are held throughout the year, is a two-minute walk away. I saw film retrospectives of master directors. Other foreign cultural centres, which exhibited movies every week, were also nearby. During my years at the NSD, I spent more time in the library than in class; NSD has the best library and the books are available both in Hindi and English.

FTII, Pune, is another great place to study cinema. I have done the film appreciation course at the FTII, but the learning is limited because the institute is restricted to cinema; it lacks the mix of the

multiple arts and cultural environment of Mandi House.

I was a student at the NSD for three years, and continued to live in Delhi for four more years after my graduation. Seven years in that eclectic and diverse environment definitely influenced me. In a way, just living there was a lesson in filmmaking.

At NSD, we had the opportunity of viewing plays from all over the world. I was a student at the NSD for three years, and continued to live in Delhi for four more years after my graduation. Seven years in that eclectic and diverse environment definitely influenced me. In a way, just living there was a lesson in film-making.

When you became a director, did you ever wish you had gone to a film school?

TD: Never. Though I had tried, I didn't get admission at the FTII. Later, I was almost glad I didn't because I realized that FTII had given more actors, cinematographers, editors to the film industry than directors. Moreover, I felt a film degree rigidified your thinking. I can't give

I think I am an assimilation of many directors, many works of art and many films.

credit to any one form of art, or any director, or artist for the person I am today. I think I am an assimilation of many directors, many works of art and many films.

How did you transition into cinema?

TD: In 1989, after I graduated from the NSD, director Ketan Mehta was making a film, *Sardar* (1993), in Delhi. Robin Dass, our art design teacher at the NSD, asked me if I would assist him on the film. I did not know how to sketch but because it was a period film, and I loved history, I knew it would require a lot of research; so I agreed immediately. (*Smiles*)

After the production started, Robin-ji and Ketan Mehta-ji could not work together for some reason, after one schedule in Gujarat. Ketan-ji noticed my ability to work hard and asked me to stay back in the unit after Robin-ji left the film. When they started shooting the second schedule in Delhi they asked me to join them, but by then I was

already a part of another film unit that was shooting an English film, produced by Channel 4, UK. It was a British production by Arundhati Roy and Pradip Krishen; it became my first complete film as an assistant director.

I feel, an assistant who can execute background action can become a director because background action is the only job an assistant does in which he employs his own creativity.

On this film, I was handling actors, background action and the casting. Because I came from a theatre background, I was not involved in the technical aspects of the film. I feel, an assistant who can execute background action can become a director, because background action is the only job an assistant does in which he employs his own creativity. In other tasks, an assistant is following the director's orders.

When did you begin to write?
TD: It was when I was acting in a play at NSD and I performed very badly, I felt if the writing was better I could have done a better job as an actor. It was a translation of an 1884 Norwegian play, written by Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, and it was not well translated into Hindi. I knew that actors found it difficult to perform if the dialogues did not make sense to them. That is when I started translating plays at NSD, to make better sense of them. I came into this profession with writing as my core strength.

What did you do before you directed your first film?
TD: I was an assistant director from 1990 to 1994. *Electric Moon* (1992) was my first complete film as an assistant director. Then I worked on Bobby Bedi's *Bandit Queen* (1994), directed by Shekhar Kapur-ji. I joined him as a casting director, but eventually I became an assistant director and worked on the production too. It was Shekhar-ji who asked me to come to Mumbai and assist him in films. That is when I came to Mumbai. Eventually, I went on to write many scripts for Shekhar-ji, like *Maut Se Jo Darte Nahin*, *Major Saab*, and *Tara Rum Pum*; unfortunately, none of them saw the light of day. (*Smiles*)

Then a new TV channel, BITV, started and Shekhar-ji was the creative head. Saurabh Shukla and I both produced the TV show *Hum Bambai Nahin Jayenge!* We produced about fourteen episodes, but the channel shut down. I produced, directed and wrote that show, and

Saurabh co-wrote it with me. The only good thing that came out of it was the episodes I wrote and directed became kind of a show reel for what I could do.

I did TV for about four to five years, I wrote and directed the first seven to eight episodes of *Just Mohabbat*. However, I had differences of opinion with my producer and walked out of that show. Then I wrote and directed the Star TV show *Naya Daur*. Then I wrote and directed six episodes of *Star Bestsellers;* short films of forty-five minutes. Since I was keen to do films, I would shoot for TV as cinematically as possible. Actors loved the way I shot them. Even though the TV serials did not do well, the crew and people who saw my TV work told me that I was a good technician.

I needed money since I was married, so I got deeper into writing, and wrote dialogues for Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998). Mani Ratnam's Hindi was not good, so I ended up assisting him on the film, and continued to work on it until the post-production.

When did you begin to write your first film as director?
TD: It was in 1996 that I started writing Haasil. I was determined to make this my first film and had been pitching it to producers for over two years. I had pitched the script to almost every producer in Mumbai. Most people I met already knew I was a writer, so they would propose I write a script for them, and then they would produce *Haasil*. But I refused them, even though I needed the money badly. I always stood my ground.

How did you meet the producer of your first film?
TD: I met Goldie Behl when he was directing his first film *Bas Itna Sa Khwaab Hai* (2001). I wrote the dialogues for it. Goldie introduced me to Vijay Jindal of Karma Network. Goldie proposed to Vijay-ji to finance my first film and he, Goldie, would produce it. But when Goldie and Vijay-ji could not work together on the project for some reason, I too backed out. After many days, Jindal-ji asked me to meet him and he offered to produce my film. That is how I found my first producer.

What was your conviction behind writing something like Haasil?
TD: In 2000, the Kumbh Mela was happening after twelve years. I was keen to capture that major event for my film because my film's climax was set during the Kumbh and it was just three months away.

At that time, I had not yet met Vijay Jindal-ji. I knew Bobby Bedi, the producer of *Bandit Queen*. I told Bobby about my need to shoot the climax during the upcoming Kumbh Mela even though I did not have a producer. Bobby seemed convinced by the pitch, because he told me

to come to Delhi and shoot the TV serial *Rajdhani* for him and he would begin the production of my film, *Haasil*, simultaneously.

I travelled to Delhi and started writing and directing the TV serial, *Rajdhani*, for Star TV. We would shoot from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. This went on for a month without any discussion about *Haasil*. I was desperate to shoot my film. After shooting six or seven episodes of *Rajdhani*, I left Bobby's TV serial and returned to Mumbai, to continue looking for a producer who would give me the necessary funds and infrastructure to shoot my climax during the Kumbh which was then only two weeks away.

I had a good friend, Amita Sehgal, in Mumbai, and I approached her for financial help to shoot my climax. I knew her because we had worked together on *Bandit Queen*. Amita borrowed money from her father and lent it to me. That is how much she believed in my film. I travelled to Allahabad with my actors and a very small crew without having a producer.

I shot all the master shots of the climax during the Kumbh Mela. I edited that footage and prepared a four-minute sequence of the climax. This was around the same time that Vijay Jindal-ji called me to meet me at his office.

When I showed Vijay-ji the four-minute sequence I had shot during the Kumbh, he was impressed by the scale of the climax, the kind of story I had, and that I had shot it with nothing but funds borrowed from a friend. That is when he agreed to produce my first film. In hindsight, that was how much I believed in my script and abilities. Producers look for that kind of conviction, when they are looking to give a new director a break.

What gave you the confidence that you could direct a film?
TD: Soon after assisting on Electric Moon, Bobby Bedi, the executive producer, got the opportunity to produce a six-part TV series for Channel 4, UK. Bobby asked me to write and direct one of the stories, *Krishna's Dream*. They were six short films of forty-five minutes each. I got an FTII cinematographer to shoot it, and the story was set inside a train.

The first day I was unprepared and it was bad. My cinematographer took me in the corner and warned me that if I remained unorganized, he would leave the film. The next morning I went prepared and that was the day I felt closer to becoming a director. My dear friend and actor Irrfan Khan tells me even now it was my best work so far. (*Laughs*)

After your second release, you continued to make films for nearly seven years without any one of them releasing. What kept you going?

TD: I believed in destiny. *Paan Singh Tomar* was ready and awaiting a release for one-and-a-half years. My producer wanted to release it only on DVD. I had no say in the matter. The film did find its way to cinema screens eventually. *Shagird* was ready but not releasing because they said Nana Patekar had no box-office appeal any more. Even that film eventually released. Therefore, I believe things take their time, you have to let them play out and for that you need to have absolute faith in your destiny.

Another thing was I did not become bitter, though I did feel sad and dejected. I remained positive towards people and the work they were doing even while I was just waiting endlessly. I never let anyone see my tears. I love dogs, so I got a puppy and named him Action. I was frustrated that I could not say 'Action' as a director but thanks to my dear dog I could say 'Action' at least a hundred times a day. (*Laughs*)

You come from theatre, do you do script or scene rehearsals with your actors?
TD: No. I believe in spontaneity. Script reading makes the acting seem mechanical. I know the beats in the scene, where to punctuate the dialogue and performance, but I do

An actor should be unrehearsed. So I do not believe in script workshops.

not want the actor to know it beforehand. An actor should be unrehearsed. So I do not believe in script workshops. I am not saying doing a script workshop is bad; it is good for some directors, but not for me.

What are actors looking for in a new director?
TD: Usually, in this industry, some actors do not read scripts, which is actually good. The positive part about this is that when a writer or director narrates his script, there are innumerable things that an actor would understand; that would not have been possible just by reading the script. One thing that comes across through narration is the level of conviction of the writer or director.

What is your process of working with the actors?
TD: Before they get their make-up done, I take them to the set, along with my cinematographer. They already know the scene by then, so I allow them to perform it in the way they have understood it. While they are enacting the technicalities of the scene, I observe their natural movement and body language, and block the scene. I tell the cinematographer how I want to block it, and if he has some good

suggestions I go with them. Once we both have mutually blocked the scene, I send the actors away for make-up and costume, during which time the cinematographer executes the lighting. That is also when I prepare the shot breakdown which helps even the cinematographer know the number of shots and angles.

What is your process of casting actors?
TD: I started my professional career as a casting director. Firstly, the actor has to look like the character I have envisioned. If I can find someone like that, I cast him even if he is not a great actor, because I am confident I will bring out the character in him. I cast Jimmy Shergill in my film because I wanted an actor who looked

I believe inside every good actor is a writer. When a good actor is given only the situation and circumstances of the scene, he or she will improvise and weave the words just as a writer does.

like a person with good values and sentiments, from a good family. I ask them to perform scenes from other films and not from the film we are casting for. I believe inside every good actor is a writer. When a good actor is given only the situation and circumstances of the scene, he or she will improvise and weave the words just as a writer does.

Who was your cinematographer and why did you select him?
TD: The cinematographer has to be your friend. (*Smiles*) The director has visualized a life, and the cinematographer is the one capturing it for him on camera; so both must share a good rapport and understanding. You can correct many things after the film is shot, by editing and with the help of sound and music, but you cannot change the image itself. It is somewhat easier now with digital technology, but you still need to come close to perfection during shoot. Rafey Mehmood was my cinematographer on *Haasil*. Rafey is an old friend from Allahabad, and an FTII graduate. I liked his work. He is simple, and has a calm temperament. The latter is very important.

Was the first day of shoot heaven or hell? What scene did you shoot?
TD: If I do not take into account the climax I had shot during the Kumbh, my first day of shoot was in Mumbai, but I had to portray it as Allahabad. In Bandra West there is a vegetable market where the street is very busy. My first shot was of Jimmy riding a scooter with Tinnu Anand seated behind. On the first day of the shoot, I try to

shoot easier scenes, so that we get through any teething problems with ease. The unit is new to each other and if you plan an intense shoot on the first day, it burdens your unit. Begin easy and build the working relationships gradually.

Who was your editor?
TD: After I shot the climax scene at the Kumbh Mela, I approached a friend, Aseem Sinha, who was an editor and had assisted Renu Saluja. He was familiar with Avid technology, but it was too expensive and so I needed someone who was more familiar with the older Steenbeck technology. I would let Aseem do a line-up of the scene according to the script, and then view it. I believe in in-film editing. My editors don't have much choice during the edit. (*Smiles*)

Can a director's job be mentally and physically exhausting?
TD: As a director, you have to deal with so many people and you have to sync them with your vision. Good reputation is also important. I don't like working with someone who has a reputation of being troublesome, even if he is the most talented or skilled person in his field. I'd rather work with people who are easy-going and professional even if they're not the best in their field. When I make that choice, I have to work even harder to bring them to the level I want. That takes up a lot of my energy. Some actors need you to perform a scene to understand what you need from them. Some cinematographers are great operators, but poor in lighting. So, you have to compensate for every talent or skill that falls short on the set. Thus, it can get very exhausting.

Does a director also have to manage egos?
TD: Firstly, a director has to manage his own ego. Creative people have big egos. They create magic from intangible things like emotions and philosophies. When we make a film, there are at least fifteen to twenty creative people involved and the director needs to create a balance to prevent a clash of their ideas.

When my film *Ghulami* stalled, we were informed the production would cease in three days and no one could be paid as there was no money. An argument broke out between the locals and the producer. Some members from our crew did not have rooms to stay. I had no solutions to their money woes but I offered my room to four members of our crew and slept on a bench in the lawn of the hotel. I surrendered my own ego to diffuse the situation. Your own ego is one trap you cannot afford to fall into.

Is film-making a journey or a destination?

TD: It is a journey. Writing a song can take time, but it will not take six months. A painting may take a day or a few weeks. Film is one art that can take a year or more to create. Something that goes on for so long can be only a journey. In a long period of shooting, you will meet new people, see new places, and have new experiences. You get to know these new places and people closely because you work with them, and often live with them at one location. In that period, they can become your close friends. It's similar to what happens on a journey.

If your daughter says she wants to be a film-maker, what would you advise her?
TD: Even now at the age of thirteen, she says she wants to be a film-maker. (*Laughs*) I told her earlier that mere technique would not make her a director. A variety of experiences and good reading habits will make her a good director. I will give her a camera and say, 'Make what you want, tell any story you need to tell.'

What advice do you have for today's generation?
TD: Firstly, never do anything that will make you feel bad about yourself. You should not have to regret your actions. Your family

You must preserve your selfrespect if you want to live happily. Money is important only for the material necessities of life. You need to draw the line between necessity and indulgence. You have to be honest about your work.

and friends should be proud of your work and deeds. You must preserve your self-respect if you want to live happily. Money is important only for the necessities of life. You need to draw the line between necessity and indulgence. You have to be honest about your work. David Dhawan once told me, 'Tigmanshu, why do you make such intense films? They must require very intense thought process and work. Make lighter films, my friend!' (*Laughs*) He is a well-wisher, so I laughed. But I did not know what to say. Telling these stories is innate to me. Also that success cannot

Let your destiny play out. Success will follow.

be quantified nor predicted, and destiny has a huge role to play in it. Let your destiny play out. Success will follow.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Aseem Mishra Speaks on Tigmanshu Dhulia

Tigmanshu narrated the story of *Paan Singh Tomar* to me in less than three minutes. Then he handed me the script. When I returned home, I was so eager to know what made someone turn into a dreaded dacoit, I read the script that same evening. I immediately called Tigmanshu and told him I was on board. (*Smiles*)

We met the next day and spoke about things like other forms of art. And then we discussed about camera techniques, whether to shoot it in 16mm or go with the digital format. I think, we were discovering each other's souls in our conversation, and I believe cinematography has a lot to do with the soul.

Usually, when I reach the location, he gives me the scene we are going to shoot. I read the scene and since I have read the script I am actually revising what I already know. He is also quite well versed with the kind of lenses cinematographers use, and what technology advances can do for a film. So, the possibilities of the camera technique do not overwhelm his mind. And he is as concerned about the lighting as I am. (*Smiles*)

One thing we were both clear about filming *Paan Singh Tomar* was the lensing. We were shooting on super 16mm because of financial constraints. And we were enthusiastic about using the 14mm to 24mm range of wide lens, because we wanted to capture the environment of Paan Singh. We wanted to reveal the stark beauty of the harsh and dry yet fascinating landscape.

He makes the actors rehearse the entire scene with emotional quotient, like how it is done in theatre, and he positions his characters in such a way that my camera and his characters are both in sync. Tigmanshu is almost lyrical in the way he choreographs a shot, the way he blocks his characters, the way he writes the dialogues; they have a kind of rhythm if you analyse the film.

Tigmanshu is more of an actor's director. And he is very open to suggestions. He is very clear about what he wants, but not rigid about it. If he likes the way you are thinking, he will stand by your suggestions. But if he sees that there is no point in changing a lens or an angle, he'll override your suggestion and back it with solid reasoning.

The best thing about Tigmanshu as a director is his clarity. He is one of those directors who knows his films really well. He is also very honest about the craft. He can shoot for sixteen to seventeen hours at one stretch without a break if he feels it is important to the continuity of the actor's emotions or performance. Another good thing about him is that he himself rehearses with the actors. He places the camera according to that. However, he allows me to change the camera placement if he likes my suggestion. He is absolutely honest and an extremely sensitive man when it comes to art; very intelligent, with a

great sense of humour.

VISHAL BHARDWAJ

'I think I like to raise questions in my viewer's mind through my stories. I want them to question me, themselves, society, the state, whatever the film's subject is.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Makdee (2002), *Maqbool* (2003), *The Blue Umbrella* (2005), *Omkara* (2006), *Kaminey* (2009), *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011), *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013), *Haider* (2014)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Uttar Pradesh; lived in Najibabad until he was in fifth standard; spent a large part of his childhood in Meerut; was a cricketer but gave it up when he realized it's too expensive when his family's financial circumstances changed overnight due to his father's untimely death; did his college education in New Delhi; recorded his first song as music composer for *Veham*, sung by Asha-ji, in1984; composed music for the TV series *The Jungle Book* in 1989; first film as director was *Makdee* (2002); from his first film as music composer to his first film as a director, it took him eighteen years.

MY TAKE

When my father, Anand Bakshi, passed away in 2002, on the day of the funeral I saw a man, who I thought looked familiar, lending his shoulder to my father's body. He was one of the few who carried him from the doorsteps of our house to the gate of the building. That man was Vishal Bhardwaj. It was only later when I happened to see the news clipping of the funeral on TV that I recognized him as the music composer who worked with my dad. I can never forget the sadness I saw on his face that day. That was enough for me to never forget his face.

I think he does not want to be in any kind of limelight and would rather let his work speak for him.

When I met Vishal-ji for my book, he was a bit reluctant as he politely said he did not know what he could possibly say about himself or his work, because he feels his music, his films speak for him. I told him that I had read online about his struggles and once

upon a time he would play the harmonium at food festivals at Pragati Maidan. Would he not like to inspire someone somewhere who has a similar dream of reaching Hindi or any other cinema? Vishal-ji's eyes went moist. After a brief silence he agreed to give me an interview for this book. It took me two years to complete it, as he got involved in the production of two films, but the wait was worth it.

Vishal-ji speaks softly. But within this composer are emotions larger than the world's grandest orchestral sounds and deeper than the oceans.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: I remember when I saw your first film Makdee, I felt that the film is rambling on until the moment the twin sister disappears inside the haunted house.
Vishal Bhardwaj (VB): I think you are right because that is when you feel the pangs of missing someone dear to you. (*Pauses*) Until then it is just fun and games. Sadly, we value something only when we do not have it any more; and that is a basic human problem.

Was the subject of your film something you had experienced yourself?
VB: When I was thirteen, I witnessed ghosts, witchcraft, witchery, spell craft, black magic, call it what you may. I saw somebody close to my family possessed, and being treated by an exorcist. He allegedly used some supernatural faculties to cure this possessed person. It really affected me badly. I was very angry with my relatives. They were adults and they should not have taken me there to see all that! The fear remained with me for a long while. As I matured, I discarded the fear of supernatural things. That is probably how the story of *Makdee* was born in my head. I wanted to fight the superstition, and kick it out of my system, out of my being. I wanted to tell a story that helps destroy such myths and superstition.

Let us now travel back in time, to your origins; where were you born and brought up?
VB: I was born in Chandpur, near Dhampur in district Bijnor, UP. Then we lived in Najibabad. From sixth standard to twelfth, we lived in Meerut. Though I have roots in UP, I consider myself a rootless person.

What about living in Meerut or UP has influenced you as a film-maker?
VB: Meerut is where I met, and was familiarized with, the world and characters I created in my fourth film, *Omkara* (2006). Meerut is where I first fell in love (*smiles*), and was exposed to great poetry. I was studying in a government college, and kids from all sections of

society came there. My father wanted me to shift to an English-medium elite school. But by then I had made many friends, so I did not want to change schools.

However, after the twelfth standard, I regretted my decision of not shifting to an English-medium education, because English had become a very important language by then. Sadly, some people in our country suffer from a complex because of that; if you do not speak good English, you are ridiculed by those who speak it well. I suffered because of that; when I would be in a group of friends who spoke English fluently, I feared being ridiculed for speaking Hindi or English that was not good enough for them, so I spoke very little.

At that time, I regretted not knowing English properly. However, now I feel if I had taken up the elite education my father wanted me to have, I would not have been able to create the world, the milieu, I set *Omkara*, and so many other films, in. For example, a character like Langda Tyagi reflected some of the people from my school and college years.

In small towns, even the paanwala, the mithaiwala, are characters that leave a lasting impression on you by their nuanced habits, colloquial language, etc. I have observed keenly that in north India people generally speak as though they are characters performing in a theatre, or reciting dialogue from a play or a movie. (*Laughs*) They love to flaunt colloquial words and phrases to such an extent that even their day-to-day normal conversation is punctuated with some amazing dialogue-baazi and old proverbs and what not. (*Laughs*)

In hindsight, another great thing that happened was that near my home there was a little slum and the slum kids were my friends. From them, unknowingly, I learnt so much about their everyday existence, their needs and their dreams. One of my childhood friends is a hand-rickshaw puller. I must have been in the ninth standard, and yet I noticed there was discrimination against him.

Anything else from your past that has influenced you greatly?
VB: Riots. I was in college, in Delhi, doing my first year and happened to be in Meerut for a weekend. I witnessed Hindu– Muslim riots, and it affected me deeply. I realized, on the surface things are calm in our society, but just scratch the surface and you will discover a deep-rooted divide amongst people. Like dormant volcanoes, there is a conflict waiting to erupt.

I realized, on the surface things are calm in our society, but just scratch the surface and you will discover a deep-rooted divide amongst people.

Like dormant volcanoes, there is a conflict waiting to erupt.

Although I am a Brahmin, I no longer consider caste and religion as necessary to live a good and spiritual life. That is one good thing that has come with all my experiences so far; maybe someday I will make a film on the subject of the deep divide below the surface of our society.

As a child, what kind of books did you read, and who were your favourite authors?
VB: I read mostly fiction, and I loved detective stories and comic books. I normally read Hindi novels, and Surender Mohan Pathak, S.C. Bedi. I did not read Hindi literature. Bedi wrote teenage-detectives stories for children. We would go berserk when Bedi's new novels would arrive in the bookstores. During our summer break, we would cycle to the library to ask if his new novel has arrived. It was such a treat preparing oneself to read it after a good meal. (*Smiles*) The English language authors I read were Ayn Rand and Irving Wallace. Irving's stories are dramatic and some Hindi films have been adapted from his books. As I grew older, I read more of Urdu poetry.

Did you write poems or stories when you were young?
VB: I did. I wrote poems in Hindi, mostly because my father was a poet, and a Hindi films lyrics writer.

You never wrote short stories as a child or a teen?
VB: Only much later, when I was an adult. I had to struggle for many years to establish myself as a music composer, so I could not pursue writing. It's only lately that I have begun writing short stories.

Did you grow up with any instrument of art, like a flute, a tabla or a camera?
VB: There was harmonium at home and I played it as a hobby, for family and friends. The harmonium was my favourite instrument because I composed my tunes on it.

You are a music composer and a director, do you remember the first tune or song you composed?

I found it difficult to memorize my history lessons. So I would compose my history answers as songs, because they were long, and I composed them in

metre so that I could sing my lessons. Because that helped me remember them. I would compose a different tune for every paragraph I had to learn. That's how I managed to study history and pass my exams.

VB: Yes. But it was not a film song. (*Laughs*) I found it difficult to memorize my history lessons. So I would compose my history answers as songs, because they were long, and I composed them in metre so that I could sing my lessons. Because that helped me remember them. I would compose a different tune for every paragraph I had to learn. That's how I managed to study history and pass my exams. (*Laughs*)

You mentioned your father was a poet, was that his profession? What did your mother do?

VB: My mother was a homemaker. My father, Ram Bhardwaj, was a government employee; a sugar-control inspector. However, as a hobby, he wrote lyrics for film songs, and he had worked with music composers Laxmikant–Pyarelal, Kalyanji–Anandji, and Usha Khanna-ji. He wrote lyrics for films like *Ahimsa* (1979), *Shuruaat* (1983), *Kanoon Meri Mutthi Mein* (1984), *Khoon ka Badla Khoon* (1978) and *Chhota Baap* (1977).

Did your father's work as a lyrics writer for these composers inspire you in any way to become a music composer?

VB: I became a music composer thanks to Usha Khanna-ji. My father was writing lyrics for a film and Usha Khanna-ji was the music composer. My father casually narrated the first verse, the mukhda, of his lyrics to me, and instantly I composed a tune for it. The director of that film was Chand Saab. When we were in Mumbai, during my summer vacations, my father mentioned to him that I had composed a tune. Chand Saab encouraged me to sing it. I did. Chand Saab called up Usha-ji, who was the composer, and told her to listen to my composition. Usha-ji said it is a very good tune and she would elaborate on it. Later, she met me and said, 'You can be a very good composer. I am using your tune in the film.' I was eighteen or nineteen years old then. I was introduced and exposed to the film world because of my father.

When was the first time you saw a film shoot, and what do you remember from it?

VB: I saw many film shoots because of my father. They were really intriguing because there were so many people behind the camera and I hadn't really thought about it while watching films. I clearly remember being on the sets of a film being directed by Chand Saab, where Vinod Khanna was the hero. I was a big fan of Vinod Khanna, and found his orange colour Osho robe fascinating. (*Smiles*)

Were you interested in theatre during school or college?
VB: No. I was only interested in music. Actors Ashish Vidyarthi, Manoj Bajpai were my batchmates and were doing theatre then. I was surrounded by a culture of the performing arts and music because I was composing music for theatre. I had always wanted to make a mark in music.

Was there any other connection to films other than your father being a film lyricist?
VB: Yes. We were a really filmy family. (*Laughs*) My elder brother was a film distributor for Delhi and UP territories.

Were you a 'first day first show' person?
VB: Yes! In a small town or city, arranging cinema tickets was a big deal. Because of my father and my brother's filmy connections, I knew the cinema managers and could arrange for tickets even when shows were house full. That made me a real hero among my friends. The cinema hall manager and gatekeeper would sometimes allow me and my friends to walk in and out of any show at any time without buying tickets. (*Smiles*)

Do you have a clear memory of the earliest film you watched?
VB: I think it was Dharmendra's *Loafer* (1973).

Is there any film that inspired you to become a director?
VB: When I was established as a music composer, I began to travel to film festivals along with Gulzar Saab. I saw Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and it impacted my senses. The violence was treated like entertainment. It was thrillingly alive. Another director who influenced me was the Polish director and screenwriter Kieslowski, who made the *Three Colours* trilogy.

When did you realize that there is a director who is responsible for the films you see?
VB: My father had told me very early on that cinema is a director's medium. Even before college, I was aware of this, because directors like Chand Saab would visit our house and I would hear them speak

about how films are made.

You had never assisted a director, and you didn't go to film school. Did that overwhelm you in any way when you directed your first film?

When I became a director, the first thing I had to struggle with was my shyness so I could take charge and command of the set and my crew.

VB: I did suffer from a certain shyness when I started. The paraphernalia of film-making can overwhelm a first-time director. When I became a director, the first thing I had to struggle with was my shyness so I could take charge and command of the set and my crew.

Was anyone else in your family musically inclined?

VB: By the time I was in the sixth standard, my brother was playing the mandolin, and my sister was learning the sitar. So there was music all around me from my formative years.

Is it true that you used to play the harmonium during food festivals at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi?

VB: On 7 May 1985, the date is etched in my memory, at Meerut while I was still in college, I returned home in the morning after cricket practice, and saw all our family's belongings spread out on the street. And my father lying on the street gasping for breath. (*Pauses*) The house we were living in was rented, and the landlord had obtained a seizure of property order to force us to vacate the house overnight, even though the matter had been settled out of court.

I held my father in my arms and amongst our belongings lying scattered on the street, we looked desperately for my father's medicines, but could not find them. I went to get the doctor. When I returned, I realized my father had been shifted to a neighbour's house. People had gathered outside the house and as I approached the house I asked them if my father was okay. When I entered the house, it was too late. Even now, when I see a Steadicam point-of-view shot in any film, I travel back. I am reminded of that walk towards the house where my father lay dead.

When this happened, my brother was struggling to establish his own career, and I was still in my second year of college, and I had to arrange money to pay for my hostel fees. Later, after my graduation, my family told me that they would support me financially only if I opened a video library store. I told them I was never going to sit in a

video library. I was determined to become a music composer.

I had many friends who were singers. One of my good friends got a contract to sing at the UP Pavilion in Pragati Maidan; it was a daily evening show of one-and-a-half to two hours. He told me we

I performed at food festivals to earn a livelihood; which artiste likes to play music at an event where no one is really listening to you?

should do this show together, he would sing and I could accompany him on the harmonium; we would sing ghazals, because ghazals were very popular at that time. I performed at food festivals to earn a livelihood; which artiste likes to play music at an event where no one is really listening to you? Moreover, in those days most families did not want their child to be a part of the film industry, because it was considered an uncertain and insecure profession.

I had read somewhere that you were a very good cricketer. Was that your ambition before wanting to be a music composer?
VB: I wanted to become a cricketer; I even played for the Under-19 team for UP. But I soon realized sports is a very expensive career choice, considering the amount of time and equipment you require to remain physically fit, eat right, to practice and perfect your skills. My family did not have that kind of money. After that, I travelled to Delhi to study at the Hindu College.

What were your parents' dreams for you?
VB: My mother wanted me to be a doctor, but I couldn't even dissect a frog in our school biology class. (*Laughs*) I began bunking the biology laboratory class regularly, and even threatened my parents that if they force me to become a doctor, I would run away from home. (*Laughs*) However, my father wanted me to be a music composer, and being a poet and film lyrics writer himself, he encouraged me greatly. I recollect him telling me the medium of cinema belongs to the director and no one else. I can say his opinion got etched in my subconscious, and somewhere, even though I became a music composer, his opinion somehow led me to become a director. But when I arrived in Mumbai to work in films in 1990, I came with the single focus of becoming a music composer.

What was your first job in the music or film-making business, and how did you get it?
VB: While I was living in Delhi, I found work in a record label, Pan Music; they later produced *Maachis* (1996), for which I composed the

music. Pan Music was owned by R.V. Pandit, a very nice man. My job responsibility was handling A&R, Artists and Repertoire. I took up the job with the motive that at the very first opportunity, I would seek a transfer to their Mumbai office, where the Hindi film industry was.

Around that time, my brother, who was living in Mumbai, suffered a heart attack, so I went to Mumbai to be with him. I asked my boss, Mr Pandit, if I could be transferred to Mumbai so that I could also attend to my brother. I assured him my brother would host my stay. That is how I arrived here. For the next year and a half, I worked with Pan Music.

Any memorable challenge or experience from when you first arrived here for work?

Just travelling in Mumbai's local trains teaches you so much. In just two months, it can transform you into a different person. You need to have a certain attitude to just get in and out of Mumbai's local trains.

VB: I used to travel from Andheri to Churchgate daily for work, and from that alone I learnt a lot about life. (*Laughs*) Just travelling in Mumbai's local trains teaches you so much. In just two months, it can transform you into a different person. You need to have a certain attitude to just get in and out of Mumbai's local trains. However crowded the train might be, you need to get in if you want to get to your destination, get closer to your dream. That experience hardens you. Since I was a cricketer I was already a pretty tough fellow. But Mumbai made me even tougher. (*Smiles*)

I still travel by local trains sometimes, even though it's difficult because some people recognize me. I try to travel as much as I can with regular people, to remain connected with the masses, to be closer to my audience.

Did you have any backup plans?

VB: I have never had a plan B in life. I think those who never have a standby plan realize their primary plan. When I was working with Pan Music, I decided I would get married only when I leave my job

I have never had a plan B in life. I think those who never have a standby plan realize their primary plan.

and become independent. I realized later that it was a very stupid idea. However, my wife Rekha understood me. I told her if I kept doing secure jobs, like with Pan Music, or any other company, nobody would take me seriously. I think people help you when they feel you are insecure and need the work badly. If you have excess food, will anyone offer you any? I doubt it. I realized that

I shut all other doors, I turned away from all secure paths offered to me, and kept only one open, that of becoming an independent music composer.

soon enough, and I left the security of the job with Pan Music, I got married to Rekha, and began my struggles to find work as a music composer. With no secure income or work, and with no alternate plan. To be more specific, while I was with Pan Music and earning Rs 2,750 a month, Magna Sound offered me a job at Rs 10,000 per month. Everybody advised me to take up the offer but I shut all other doors, I turned away from all secure paths offered to me, and kept only one open, that of becoming an independent music composer.

Considering that you knew from an early age that cinema is a director's medium, did you never think of studying film-making?
VB: No. I chose to study BA. My father died while I was still in college, and soon it became a matter of our survival; it was a struggle to arrange the next day's meals, so going to FTII or NSD was simply not an option. Thankfully, when you are in college, you do not realize the impact of not having money because you are surrounded by friends. The emotional bonding with your college friends keeps you afloat awhile. It is your college friends who keep you alive; there is no relationship more important than friendship. It can encompass the world along with you. Mukul Verma, my friend who would sing while I played the harmonium, helped me a lot. And Om Saigan, he is above seventy years of age now, helped me too. Om-ji heard a few of my compositions and after my wedding, he told me he liked them. He told me to keep working on them because one day I would go far. Om-ji was a respected man and his compliment was a very big encouragement for me.

Your history lessons were your earliest compositions. Which was your first professional composition for a feature film?
VB: My first professional music composition was in 1984, for Veham, produced by A.V. Mohan; I was nineteen years old then. The song was sung by Asha-ji. I was credited in the credit titles of the film. Producer

A.V. Mohan was a friend of my father's and gave me the opportunity to compose for his film. He introduced me to Asha-ji and requested her if she would sing my first song in films. She immediately agreed.

When you directed your first film, did you feel you lacked any particular technique or knowledge?
VB: Yes, and on many levels. I knew nothing about camera lens or editing. Before I directed *Makdee*, I had directed two short films and that experience was even more painful. (*Laughs*) I reached the location where we had to shoot, but I just could not figure out how to capture what I wanted. I must have come across as a joker to my unit. (*Laughs*) However, I am a quick learner, I grasp things very fast, and soon I got a hang of how to capture my story through the camera.

Are you always upfront and honest with your crew when things confuse you?
VB: Yes, one thing about me is that I never try to show I am intelligent. As long as I am learning, what others think doesn't matter to me. I knew that one day they will know that I know my job. Unfortunately, I have observed that some cinematographers take undue advantage of a new director, or someone who does not have the kind of technical knowledge and skill the cinematographer has. There have been times in the beginning of my career as director when I regretted not having attended film school. Now, I no longer have that complex. One can learn only by making films. I am blessed that I received so many opportunities to learn.

You were an established music composer when you switched to direction. What made you switch and how did you earn your first project as director?
VB: It was around 2000, I had already done nearly ten films as a music composer and had some work on hand. Honestly, I wasn't able to create what the industry calls hit songs. Maybe it was because I was always trying to remain true to the script, the environment of the story. I think I took myself too seriously.

Once, I was composing music for a film that was being produced by a very big production house, the lyricist was Anand Bakshi Saab. For a trivial matter, the director insulted and humiliated me unnecessarily in front of my singers and musicians during a song recording. I heard him out, agreed to do what he had wanted, and without protest or complain I returned to the recording room to finish the song at hand. But, I could not concentrate on my work because the humiliation kept playing in my head. I walked out of the recording studio and went home. I cried that night and went to sleep.

The next day, I decided I would not do the film anymore. Your

father, my lyricist Anand Bakshi Saab, asked me why I left the film. I explained what had happened and he agreed with my decision. I was not a big composer then. The producer and director were a formidable lot and some sections of the media began publishing and saying nasty things about me – that I was supremely arrogant and unreasonable and that I had walked out of a film during recording because of my attitude problems. No one from the media asked me for my side of the story and passed judgement and labelled me difficult to work with. Maybe it was because I was a nobody and was up against a big production house.

Soon, under some pretext or the other, I was dropped from some films that I was about to begin work on or was already working on. I realized they did not want to work with me any more, because they believed the gossip doing the rounds about me. I stopped getting work as a music composer. However, now I thank god that it happened. Had it not happened, I would probably never have thought of finding work for myself as a composer by becoming a director. I realized if I wanted work as a composer, I had to do something extraordinary. My father had already planted in my subconscious that cinema is a director's medium, so for me direction was the natural next step. That really is from where my journey as a director began.

Is that when you wrote the script of Makdee, *your first film as director?*
VB: No. My first film as director was supposed to be with Ajay Devgn Productions. It was titled Barf. It was about the decades of enmity between India and Pakistan. It had a formidable cast of Ajay Devgn, Manoj Bajpai and Sushmita Sen. We had done extensive work on its pre-production and nearly a month before we were to go on the floors, Ajay's production *Raju Chacha* (2000) released, and my destiny changed. *Raju Chacha* did not fare well at the box office, so they took the decision not to produce any more films. Sadly, the first film they dropped was *Barf;* that was my destiny. I was very disheartened, because we had already recorded some songs, the costumes had been worked upon in detail, and we were ready to embark on our first shooting schedule in twenty-one days; I was simply heartbroken.

Your first film Makdee is set against the backdrop of witchcraft and children; very different in genre from your first script Barf, set against the backdrop of Indo-Pak enmity and relationship. What made you write Barf?
VB: When I read books on film-making and film-makers, I realized that for most of them their first script came from within them. For film-makers who wrote their first film from without, their scripts

I was always hurt that our subcontinent had been partitioned on the

basis of religion; for me it was akin to separating two brothers, or dividing a happy joint family.

did not translate well into film. The Indo-Pak relationship, the enmity, was a thought, an emotion, I had been harbouring since many years. I was always hurt that our subcontinent had been partitioned on the basis of religion; for me it was akin to separating two brothers, or dividing a happy joint family. I would always think if East and West Germany could be unified, what was preventing our subcontinent from being reunited. So, when I decided to become a director and needed the script to come from within, I thought of making my first film based on these thoughts that had always haunted me.

How did Makdee happen?

VB: I tried to revive *Barf* for another year or two. I must have given script narrations of *Barf* to almost every producer in this industry. Sadly, many people are superstitious in this industry and when one producer drops a film, someone else very rarely picks it up, fearing something must be wrong with it; they will not hear the story or script but would rather know why another producer backed out of your project. (*Laughs*) Therefore, I decided I would approach a government institution that produces films.

How did you finally arrive on the script of Makdee, and how did you get a producer?

VB: Those days I was working as a music composer on a film being produced by Jayshree Makhija. I became close to them and they liked the story of *Barf* and tried to get hold of a big production house to back the film. That did not happen, however, Sai Paranjpye was their good friend, and she was the head of Children's Film Society of India (CFSI).

During dinner, Jayshree-ji mentioned to Sai that I had a good story and wanted to direct a film, and I was looking for a producer. Sai agreed to hear more about it. I soon came up with the subject of *Makdee*, because I had been wanting to make a story in the space of Enid Blyton. Sai heard the story and the idea of having a witch was hers. Soon I submitted the script and budget to CFSI and it was passed.

Did you get the CFSI approval easily because you had an actor like Shabana Azmi on board?

VB: No, she was not on board when I presented the proposal to CFSI. In fact, when I approached her to act in my film, she was worried that

if my film did not do well, my shop as a music composer would also shut. (*Smiles*) The 9/11 attacks of New York

I believe I should not worry about the result of my action in future, but live only in the moment.

had occurred recently and somehow that came to my mind. I told her that thousands of people had died a few days ago in the world trade centre attacks. Not a single person from the thousands who died that day could have predicted their deaths. No one can possibly know their fate ahead of time. I believe I should not worry about the result of my action in future, but live only in the moment. Even my father died too early in life, he was just forty-nine when he passed away suddenly. So I want to live in the moment and even though I am a music composer, I have the urge to be a film-maker and I would love you to be in it. She agreed to act in my film. (*Smiles*)

You said that the CFSI produced the film, but the credits of Makdee *mention it was produced by you.*
VB: CFSI was the producer when the project started but after they saw the rough cut, or what you call the first cut that producers normally watch, CFSI did not want to own the film anymore. When they saw the rough cut, they hated the film and the chairperson said that she would slash it down to sixty minutes from ninety minutes. She then said that she wanted to scrap the entire film and wanted the money returned but since I had been in the industry for so long, she was willing to turn it into a sixty-minute film.

When CFSI rejected your film, did you lose faith in yourself and the film?
VB: I did have some doubts about my abilities and even my film. Having said that, I also felt then that the CFSI committee members did not watch my film properly. The reason I say this is because it is very tricky judging a film when you are reviewing its rough cut, in which background score and some other crucial cinematic elements are not yet there. Therefore, while reviewing a rough cut one needs to pay even more attention, especially when you are viewing the film on a screen which is only slightly bigger than a desktop monitor. Under such circumstances, I was not surprised they saw no value in my film. I felt they had arrived at their judgment carelessly.

However, the film did release, even though CFSI did not produce it, and it was ninety minutes long. Moreover, the film travelled to five international film festivals before it released in India. How did you manage to do that?

VB: When the CFSI rejected *Makdee*, I called up my writer and friend Gulzar Saab, and told him I wanted to show him my film's rough cut. Gulzar Saab saw the film and said it is a lovely film. After he complimented me, I told him what CFSI thought about my film. He was shocked and had such faith in it that he advised me to buy it back from them and take the chance of releasing it on my own as an independent producer.

Then I invited Shabana Azmi-ji to view it. Shabana-ji brought along nearly hundred kids from her building for the preview, as she wanted them to see it too. Shabana-ji and the kids loved the film. Only after she said it's a lovely film, I showed her the letter from CFSI rejecting my film. She advised me to return their money and get complete ownership of the film. At that time, it was impossible for me to raise Rs twenty-five lakhs I needed to buy the film back from CFSI. Thankfully, a friend gave me a loan.

Once I owned the film, I must have had at least a hundred previews for a variety of film distributors and exhibitors. All of them refused my film, saying there was no market for such a film. That period of seven months was the darkest in my life. When I could not find a distributor to release my film in India, I thought if I sent my film to a few reputed international festivals and if it earned even one award somewhere, it might help my film earn some good reputation amongst distributors in India. So, I sent the print of my film to some festivals and waited. One day, I had gone to a bank to discuss the possibility of raising finance from them to release the film on my own. That is when I got a mail from Chicago Film Festival that my film had won a prize. That gave me a tiny ray of hope. (*Smiles*)

Soon, I showed the film to Shailendra Singh of Percept Limited; he saw it along with some kids and they all liked the film. He offered to be the co-producer on the film and was willing to pay fifty lakhs for it. He was most instrumental in the release of my first film. From the time I sent the prints to various international film festivals to the time Percept bought the film for an all-India release, it took ten months.

The highlight of Makdee was the witch. However, I have heard that Shabana-ji does not like wearing make-up, and you imported eye lenses from London for her get-up. What other efforts did you put in for this film?
VB: It was such a tiny film in terms of the scale of production and budget, and I was getting Rs forty-seven lakhs to make the film. But since this was my first film, I'd wanted to do more than my best. I knew the witch had to work for the story to work. Therefore, I did not compromise on the costs of her make-up and get-up. We bought eye lenses from London to make the eyes look authentic and scary. We hired the best make-up artist, Vikram Gaikwad dada, to create her get

up. Arjun Bhasin was hired to create her costume.

Your first film as director was about a witch and witchcraft, and you are a music composer too, how did you use the element of sound to evoke fear or suspense?
VB: I wanted children to get scared when they saw this film, because I knew then they would love the film. In a horror or suspense film, music is important in evoking fear in the audience's mind. You see the same film without the sound and the impact will vanish. The music score and effects guide the viewer, making them experience the emotion the director wants them to experience.

Do you hold script rehearsals with your actors?
VB: I was aware of the process and we did a few readings for my first film, but we did not have the time or money to do extensive ones. However, in my subsequent film, *Maqbool* (2003), we did extensive readings during pre-production. *Naseeruddin Shah* used to conduct those workshops for me. We also did script rehearsals during the pre-production of *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013).

Sometimes when you are the writer and the director, you get locked into the metronome rhythm you wrote. Rehearsals can help you break that locked rhythm and discover a different and better rhythm. When you hear your script in the voices of the actors, it seems and sounds different from what you had imagined while writing it. Another advantage of doing these script workshops is that you get to know your actors, and they get familiar with each other and the material. I like the chemistry that emerges from these rehearsals; chemistry not only between the actors, but also between the actors and the director.

Sometimes, when you write a good scene, you are excited by the way it plays out in your mind. But when you do the script workshop with your actors, sometimes you realize that the scene is not working. So, the advantage is that you get a month or two before the actual shooting of that scene to react to your script. Even after you have finalized and locked the way you are going to shoot something, when you are directing it is a great feeling when a new thought strikes you which is even better than what you had written during the scripting or the actor's workshop stage.

Do you think directing actors is a skill that can be learnt from workshops or books?
VB: It's an important skill and one can hone it by reading books on the subject, or by observing the process on set. As a director, with every film the skill gets honed. As for me, I generally do not direct my

actors. When I directed Priyanka Chopra for the first time, in *Kaminey*, she asked me, 'How do you want me to do this?' I told her I do not work like that, I will not direct her performance the way some other directors do. I threw the question back at her, and asked her to tell me how she would do the scene.

I know clearly what I need from my actors, how I want them to perform the scene, but I don't tell them before I know what's going on in their minds. If their opinion supersedes what I had in mind, I go ahead with their suggestion. If it's not in sync with what I had in mind, I instruct them to do it in a certain way. Sometimes, I associate my idea with theirs and we arrive at something together. I inspire them to reveal their cards before I reveal mine.

When you audition actors, what's your process?
VB: I usually come in at the final stages of the screen test. I make them rehearse their scene from the film. And it's my instinct that tells me I should go with a particular actor. There have been times when I have gone against the decision of my assistant, in fact against my entire creative team, and cast an actor simply from my instinct and it has worked. It happened during the casting of Deepak Dobriyal in *Omkara* (2006), Chandan Roy Sanyal and Amol Gupte in *Kaminey* (2009), even Narendra Jha in *Haider* (2014). Sometimes, the assistant who is directing a casting session gives a wrong cue or information to the actor. But a good actor is one who corrects unintentional misdirection. These are the good actors.

Some directors say actors don't need to be told everything, that they can't process too much information.
VB: Then that actor is not good, I mean, weak, if he or she cannot process too much information. Sometimes a director can, indeed, give too much information, sometimes he does that as he feels it is necessary, sometimes he does it as he does not know better. But a good actor, in either case, will know how much to take from what he receives from his or her director. I think actors should be completely prepped by the director, because a good actor will in any case discard all that is unnecessary.

Do you make films to raise questions, or give answers?
VB: I think I like to raise questions in my viewer's mind through my stories. I want them to question me, themselves, society, the state, whatever the film's subject is. In that sense, I must add, a director is a very brave being, the bravest in the film-making fraternity, if I may be allowed this arrogance. Because, it is he who

A film is a mirror of its director, a reflection of

stands exposed, emotionally, through his stories, his films. A film is a mirror of its director, a reflection of his inner being.

What are producers looking for in a new director? And in their projects?
VB: Passion and conviction, neither of which can be faked. A producer will see through a fake, whether the director is new, or established. Basically, a new director must be able to somehow convince the producer. So, a new director, to put it lightly, has to be a great con artist who will sell his project to you as convincingly as a con artist fools his targets. (*Laughs*) A director is someone who lies with such sheer honesty and sincerity that he can sell you his dream, and you begin to see it as yours too. (*Smiles*)

As for a film project, a producer is looking for strictly three things: profit, profit, profit. (*Laughs*) See, any project must earn back for its producer its investment at the box office. And if it earns more than just the investment, that is great for the producer. Honestly, a human being works for money, fame, or power. There is no third motive. I too have given a chance to a new director, Abhishek Chaubey, who was once my assistant. It was to help him get established. However, scratch below the surface of my decision, and you will find the politics of power. My need to feel I have the power to give someone worthy a break. And I do not fear admitting this, because out of fame, money or power, one will somehow be present in the choices I have made. (*Smiles*)

How do you work with your cinematographers?
VB: The cinematographer is like your wife on set. The wife you love, not the one you hate. (*Smiles*) I term the relationship as husband–wife because the cinematographer comprehends and understands your weaknesses and strengths, and covers up your mistakes seamlessly, as though they don't exist. He or she helps you arrive at that path during the most crucial stage of film-making, the shooting stage. A cinematographer is someone I can share anything with, and he or she understands the intricacies of not just the script but also the production process. Most importantly, the director sees his dream through the cinematographer's eyes.

I have worked with various cinematographers because I like to work with different cameramen. When you work together in more than a film or two, you know each other's weaknesses and sometimes you begin to exploit them. A time comes, sometimes, in this relationship, where a good wife turns into a bad wife, or a good husband turns into a bad husband. So before we reach a stage where we begin to take advantage of each other, I switch my eye, my

cinematographer. (*Smiles*)

Some first-time directors are confused about where to place the camera.
VB: There is no answer to this in any rule book. It comes organically to me. I usually stage the scene with the actors, before they have done their make-up. Sometimes, I do not stage the scene because I already have an idea about where the scene can be best shot from by just being in that space. The cinematographer is beside me, always, and watches the staging keenly, looking for the best angles that will suit the lighting and the action. Once my actors and I are comfortable with their movements and positions, I send them away for make-up, and in consultation with my cinematographer, I decide on the camera position, and he accordingly lights up. We discuss the shot division too, analysing simultaneously how many shots we will need to shoot.

Cinematographers are very creative visually and often they will surprise a director with an angle, an image or lighting that the director never thought was possible. And sometimes it's simply magic. A magic that happens when we and nature happen to be at the right place at the right time, and at such times even my cinematographers are taken by surprise and we take a bow to happenstance. And such moments come in every film, and can never be planned. For example, while shooting the climax of The *Blue Umbrella* (2005), it began to snow so heavily, we had no choice but to pack up. However, we did not. We continued to shoot the scene as we had envisioned it, while it snowed heavily. During the edit, we realized the snowing added to the storytelling, and it looked stunning.

What's your process of working with art directors or production designers?
VB: To begin with, it's the script that guides everyone. The script suggests you the space where a particular scene should ideally take place. Depending on the subject of my script, I instruct my art director whether the film needs to be created in a fantastic or a realistic world. For example, *The Blue Umbrella* was fantasy. *Kaminey* and *Haider* were stark reality. Having said that, I give them the liberty to come up with their own interpretation, and modify or accept or reject their interpretation, or reject my own and go completely with theirs if it tells my story better.

In art direction, I prefer to work with those who know my aesthetics, and yet can bring in their own. I used to work with the late Sameer Chanda, and after he passed away I am working with his assistants, as they were familiar with my aesthetics. The costume designer, for me, is the next significant creative on set. I think Dolly Ahluwalia, and even Payal Saluja, are simply the best amongst the best that I have worked with. For me, the costumes have to be real

and yet stand out. (*Laughs*) Naturally, this can get very challenging for a costume designer. Actually, it's a teamwork, between the cinematographer, the art director and/or production designer and the costume director. They work in sync with me to prepare the colour palette of the film.

What is your process of working with the editor?
VB: When I had started, I would assemble the footage along with the editor. Now, I allow the editor to have his spin on the footage, his perspective, and have realized that this method works better for me. This way, I get to see another perspective.

However, one particular editor, Sreekar Prasad, brought his own perspective to the narrative structure of the screenplay. I was not happy with the first cut of one of the films, nor were my actors, and I decided to show it to an editor who had not even read my script, for his objective view, and then ask him to create his own cut. That film had a very complex narrative, it had many parallel tracks.

I showed our first cut to Sreekar and allowed him to make his own cut. When he showed me his first cut, without having read the script, I realized he had taken some scenes from the second half and placed them in the first and vice versa, and even deleted some scenes. The structure he presented to me was quite different from how I had created it, and from what I had expected from him. I could not criticize it because it worked for me, but I could not accept it because it was against how I had seen my narrative. I watched his cut a second time, and then I felt his perspective definitely worked. In order to go with his cut, he suggested we shoot some new scenes, scenes that did not exist in the script. Because he had shuffled the scenes, there were action discontinuity and costume jumps. I agreed to reshoot, because his cut worked for me.

As for coverage, I normally like to shoot with two cameras. The primary angle covers the primary action and subject, and the secondary camera shoots the reaction of the primary action.

Is there something a director loses with every subsequent film?
VB: I think every director needs to preserve a certain sense of insecurity, nervousness, fear, that arrives while starting or making a film, whether it be his or her first or any other film. The moment you become confident, you slip.

What did you feel when you saw people watching your first film in a cinema hall?
VB: A sense of power. That the audience is emoting how you expected while writing your script and shooting. It makes you trust your belief

or conviction in that script.

You are a music composer, you were a cricketer too, and you are also a producer. However, as a director, what do you feel this profession has given you that no other profession could have?
VB: Direction has given me the opportunity, and maybe even the ability, to read people and their emotions deeply. Another professional who gets similar insights is a psychiatrist. (*Smiles*) However, a psychiatrist has to be objective whereas a director has to be subjective. He travels into the space of his characters, their minds and their hearts. He becomes his character while writing and directing them. He gets to dwell in their hearts, live in their minds and that matures him or her as a person.

Is there something you would like to share with today's generation?

Never lose your freedom. However, live it with responsibility. Harbour it within and guard it. Don't let anyone take it away.

VB: Never lose your freedom. However, live it with responsibility. Harbour it within and guard it. Don't let anyone take it away.

When I directed my first film, Makdee, and the producer showed no faith in it, I had the option to walk away from it and be free of my responsibility towards what I had created. I decided to be responsible for what I had created and own it, so I could be free to harvest its rewards or reap its failure. I chose to own something they considered a disaster. My conviction paid off. I got established as a director because the film worked.

Another moment in my life that I can mention in reference to freedom happened before I became a director. And, in hindsight, it was also responsible for my decision to be a director. When I was unable to find satisfactory work as a music composer, I decided the only way I could be free to hire myself as a music composer was if I directed my own film.

I was just nineteen or twenty when my father's death made me accept death as a natural progression of the journey of life. It is one thing that is unpredictable and will arrive unannounced, so why fear it. His untimely and sudden death set me free from the fear of death.

PERSPECTIVE FROM ANOTHER LENS

Cinematographer Ranjan Palit Speaks on Vishal Bhardwaj

I live in Kolkata, so Vishal invited me to Mumbai to meet him. He had

seen some of my films and documentaries, he said, and wanted me to shoot his forthcoming feature, *Susanna* and *Her Seven Husbands*, which later became *7 Khoon Maaf*. It was to be my first film with him, and my first Hindi film too.

To my surprise, when I arrived at the Mumbai hotel where I was staying, Vishal himself was there to receive me. Moreover, his wife, Rekha, was also with him. I was touched. I was new to Mumbai, as I live and work out of Kolkata, and I had heard that it is quite rare for cinematographers to get such a warm reception from their director. So their gesture remains very special to me.

Vishal and I did not really discuss any technical stuff during that first meeting, or even in the subsequent ones during pre-production. He told me, very simply, that he saw the film (I had already read the script, since he had mailed it to me prior to our meeting), as a dark comedy. I like dark films, and I shared that with him. He laughed and said that he too liked dark films. In retrospect, from that very first encounter we hit it off. We bonded immediately. Maybe because Vishal is a very warm human being, and as I later observed, he is like that with his entire crew, and not just me.

I had loved Vishal's earlier films, particularly *Maqbool* and *Omkara*. After reading the script of *7 Khoon Maaf* I was keen to be on board. This script was also quite different from some of the regular films churned out by Bollywood. We rarely get to see women protagonists in such roles, yet be able to empathize with them. Naturally, I was keen to photograph this script. Honestly, prior to this I had never ever imagined shooting a Bollywood 'song and dance' spectacle, and that's only because my sensibilities are a bit different. However, this script was so tempting that I was dying to shoot it after reading it.

Speaking of the director–cinematographer working relationship, it is important that they share a bond. Their bonding is very important, because the latter is his eye, even though the vision is the former's, the director's. To contribute one hundred per cent of my skills and talent to his vision without losing my individuality and without eroding his, we need to bond as humans first and foremost.

Speaking of style, the style we deployed in *7 Khoon Maaf* was largely hand-held and long takes. I have a background in documentaries. And the nature of shooting documentary demands that the camera remain discreet, non-intrusive, and especially the paraphernalia that can come with a feature film shoot, like lights, dolly, tracks, must be non-existent or invisible. People featuring in documentaries are not actors, so even something basic like fixing a camera on a tripod can intimidate the subjects. If I make them conscious of a 'film-shoot', they will shut down emotionally.

The style evolved organically. Vishal and I realized that when I

was shooting some scenes hand-held in the very initial schedules, his actors gained ample leverage to move freely, without the restrictions of working with a fixed camera, or a camera with a predefined movement like when it is on dolly tracks or a jib arm. The actors were able to move more freely with the camera following them and their performances became more natural. So, we started blocking the scenes by calling in the actors to enact the scene, move around and then we found that if we went hand-held and shot long takes, it would let the mise en scène happen organically, naturally. Shooting longer takes hand-held did not interrupt their performances, the mood, which can happen in the traditional shot breakdown approach. And so, we preferred to go with a hand-held shoot most of the time. Shoot the action in a long take, cut when there is a glitch, and carry on with the next shot. That is quite simply how the hand-held style of *7 Khoon Maaf* evolved between him and me.

As for the 'dark comedy look' that Vishal wanted for *7 Khoon Maaf*, one of the primary actors was a little apprehensive about not being lit adequately, and I did receive very gentle and polite feelers from her, through my chief assistant, which reflected her fears about lighting the scenes very low key. But Vishal would laugh reassuringly and tell her that we both knew what we were doing. That helped. A director supporting your style of lighting, which has actually evolved from his own vision, boosts your own conviction that the lighting is appropriate. I felt kind of rewarded, when, during one of the scenes, the actor's mother came up to me and confided, 'My daughter's performance seems actually better in the way you light up her face, the scenes.' Those scenes were lit for a dark comedy. So I took that as a great compliment as her daughter is one of our finest actors. If I was able to achieve that, my director too deserves the credit for believing in the way I lit his vision. The actor soon began appreciating what I was doing and I was very happy when she got the Filmfare Critics Award. I was touched when she went on stage and gave a lot of the credit to Vishal and me.

Having said that, and considering the story travels over many decades, with Priyanka's character changing over the decades, I was able to separate the decades and thus her different characters because I was helped greatly by the late Samir Chanda, a production designer. He did such a great job that the art direction, the colours, the costumes and my lighting all seemed to be in perfect sync with the storytelling.

Vishal is a humble human being. To sum up his humility, here is one memorable conversation we had:

Me: Vishal, please call me Ranjan, and not Ranjan-da.

Vishal: Sorry, no. I cannot address you without the ‘da’.

Me: Then I will call you Vishal-ji.

Vishal: I will really get upset if you address me with the ‘ji’. Please call me Vishal, but I will call you Ranjan-da.

Vishal is indeed unique. Unique in the sense that he is totally and completely chilled. Yes, chilled. Yet he is warm. In fact, Vishal is the warmest director I have ever worked with. There were many personal moments that I will cherish. Let me share two such moments with you. The first happened when we were hardly one-third into the film’s principal photography. Vishal asked me, ‘Where were you hiding all these years?’ He wished we had met before and done some films together. And this was just our first film together, and just the initial week of the shoot.

The second moment I cherish happened during the shoot/film wrap party on our unit’s last day in Russia. Vishal told me, raising a toast, ‘Ranjan-da, I am really going to miss you. After this, I’m really going to miss you.’ He repeated it a couple of more times, and his eyes began to get moist. His wife, Rekha, said, ‘Okay, this is fine today, but I cannot hear this every day. So, Ranjan-da, since Vishal is going to miss you so much all the time, may I suggest that either you shift to Mumbai, or Vishal, you shift to Kolkata.’ We all erupted in laughter. We were so happy that our sentiments were mutual. We were more than just director and cinematographer, I felt. We had become a family.

ZOYA AKHTAR

'You always have to keep that destination in mind because you know what you want your film to be. Shots can change, other things can change but the feeling of what you want to achieve should not change. Film-making is a journey to that feeling.'

FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

Luck by Chance (2009), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), *Bombay Talkies* (2013, segment director)

SNEAK PEEK

Born and brought up in Mumbai; read literature and sociology in college; first job with Adi Pocha's company, The Script Shop; first job as assistant director on Mira Nair's *Kama Sutra* (1996); film production diploma from New York University, 1997; first film as director *Luck By Chance* (2009). From her first job as a writer to her first film as director, it was a journey of sixteen years.

MY TAKE

After I saw *Luck By Chance*, I went online and looked up Zoya on Facebook and sent her a message telling her I loved her first film. She replied and thanked me, though we were strangers. Before we started the interview, I told her that when I was watching *Luck By Chance*, some of the dialogues resonated with me because of how much they reminded me of my own reality. I found her pragmatic, observant and principled, with the eye of a tiger.

THE CONVERSATION

Rakesh Bakshi: *Thank you for meeting me for my book. There is a dialogue in your first film* Luck By Chance, *'Tumhari pehli film ne tumhe chuna, ab tum jo karoge woh tum chunoge.' This was between actors; is it the same for a director?*
Zoya Akhtar (ZA): It is very different for actors. As a director and writer you create your own work. You choose to tell a story and then

As a director and writer you create your own work. You choose to tell a story

and then go out seeking people who will believe in it as much as you do.

go out seeking people who will believe in it as much as you do. I did not make a movie that actors were looking to do at that point. If I wanted to make a mainstream love story or something they thought was commercially safe, I would have made a film much earlier. I wanted to make something that was about me, something more personal where I could own the story, the characters. I have been an assistant director and have studied film-making, but there is nothing like actually directing a film. Before I made one myself, I was nervous about how I was going to be as a director. Therefore, I did not want to deal with a subject I didn't know really well; I had to know the subject inside out. That's what I meant when I said I wanted to own the story.

I knew how every character in *Luck By Chance* thought, felt and reacted because I knew the material, the film. I

Your first film needs to be about you and not about others.

think it took me seven years to make the film I wanted to make because I did not want to be dictated by the choice of others. Your first film needs to be about you and not about others. And that is where I am unlike Vikram (Farhan Akhtar) in the movie; he eventually gets the break that he is waiting for and he takes it. In that scenario, it makes sense for the star Shah Rukh advising newbie Vikram that your first film chooses you but you choose your next films.

Where were you born? How was the environment of your home in your formative years?
ZA: I was born in Mumbai. I spent a large part of my childhood at Bandstand, Bandra, where my mother lives. Both my parents are in films and so are two of my mother's sisters. Writers, actors, directors and various other artists would visit all the time; everyone discussed films most of the time. Writing sessions, script narrations were part of my childhood. (*Smiles*)

As a child, did you write poems and stories?
ZA: Yes, I wrote poems. Then I stopped in between and did not write much until I was nineteen. While I was still studying at St. Xavier's, a friend of mine was working at UTV with Ronnie Screwvala. He told me a writer called Adi Pocha is looking for copywriters and if I

wanted to be interviewed for it. I met Adi and he gave me a copy test. He liked what I wrote and he hired me. Adi had a studio for writers, The Script Shop; he taught me a lot about

I learnt that the most important element of writing was discipline.

the craft of writing. I learnt that the most important element of writing was discipline; I learnt that from him. I owe a lot of my writing skills to Adi.

That was your first job ever, as a professional writer?
ZA: I would write commercials for Adi, but they kept getting bounced because I was not in the mind space of the industry. (*Smiles*) Later, I wrote many corporate films, and made a lot of money copywriting. This was my first professional writing experience and it felt cool. I started copywriting because I was certain I wanted to work in media. I thought Hindi films were really bad then, so I felt I couldn't fit into the film industry or make movies that were popular. So advertising seemed like a better choice.

Would you like to explore theatre someday? What do you think theatre brings to an aspiring director?
ZA: I love theatre, I would love to write a play at some point. Theatre is a different medium from cinema; the usage of space is completely different from that in cinema. I think it will be interesting to explore, but purely as an exercise, a change of medium, and to deal with its peculiarities would surely interest me.

I would tell any aspiring director or anyone interested in cinema to watch a large number of movies because its language needs to be imprinted on your mind. I remember reading somewhere: 'Art helps you pierce the opacity of the world.' Cinema is art too. Cinema is not about mechanics, it is about image making.

Besides that, I would tell any aspiring director or anyone interested in cinema to watch a large number of movies because its language needs to be imprinted on your mind. I remember reading somewhere: 'Art helps you pierce the opacity of the world.' Cinema is art too. Cinema is not about mechanics, it is about image making.

Do you remember what you wanted to be when you grew up? When did you begin to watch cinema in earnest?
ZA: During childhood, I wanted to be a vet. (*Smiles*) Later, I wanted to be in law or journalism and media because I liked to read and write. That changed to cinema when I became a movie junkie after I saw *Salaam Bombay* (1988). That film opened many doors in my mind. I realized that such films could be made in India. That is when I started watching many films in earnest. I thought I was going to be in advertising but when I watched *Salaam Bombay* I realized I wanted to direct films. When we were growing up, we did not see the Indian parallel-wave cinema of the 1970s. I watched those films later; movies made by Sai Paranjpye, Kundan Shah, Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen. Those were films I could relate to, so I took to them naturally.

Did your parents have any particular dream for you?
ZA: They just wanted us to be happy at whatever we chose to do. My father told me that even if I became a lawnmower, I should make sure I was the best at it. (*Smiles*) When I told my father I wanted to be in films, he wanted me to go to a film school in the US. I did not want to go there and I did not want to work in mainstream cinema. Then I got the opportunity to work with Mira Nair.

How did you get your first job as assistant director with Mira Nair?
ZA: I got a call from Uma Da Cunha, the casting director, to ask if I would audition for *Kama Sutra* (1997), and I told her I was not an actor but an assistant director. Uma said that Mira would like to audition me anyway. I did a screen test which was awful and I told her I was not an actor but I wanted to work with her. She started laughing and said I could get the assistant's job but when she needed me as a background artist I would have to do it. I agreed. That's how I got my first job in films. (*Smiles*)

What did you study? Did you study films abroad?
ZA: I chose to read literature. So I did that and sociology at St. Xavier's, Mumbai. My first experience working on Kama Sutra was great and I told my father I was now ready to study film-making abroad; I did a film production diploma at New York University (NYU). My decision to be a director evolved over time. When I went to NYU, I knew I want to be a director.

What did you do professionally, after film school?
ZA: Farhan and I shot a music video *Breathless*, and Pentagram's *Price of Bullets*. Then I worked as an executive producer on two films, *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) and *Lakshya* (2004).

When you were doing your first feature film, Luck By Chance, did you ever wish you knew any particular aspect of film-making better?
ZA: I wanted to be more technically sound. However, you need to trust your crew and you should know what you want. I could be better but it is not something that bothers me. Ignorance is bliss. (*Smiles*) I do not feel those things any more. When I was making my first film I was so happy, I did not give a crap about what I did not know.

What kind of jobs did you do before you directed Luck By Chance?
ZA: My first job was as a writer with Adi Pocha at The Script Shop. After that, I worked on Mira Nair's *Kama Sutra;* I was an assistant responsible for the extras' casting. I travelled to the outdoor location a month earlier. We were shooting in Khajuraho and Jaipur, so all extras were cast from the nearby villages. I went there and photographed the local people, met them, and put them in slots of the characters we needed. I also worked on the sets and handled the background action. Then I worked on a film called *Split Wide Open* (1999), directed by Dev Benegal; I worked on the casting of that film. Then I travelled to the US to study film at NYU. While I was in New York, I assisted on a film called *Side Streets*.

After I returned, I worked on *Bombay Boys* (1998) and *Bhopal Express* (1999). After these experiences, I took time off to write the script for *Luck by Chance;* I travelled to Goa for that. While I was in Goa, Farhan told me he was making a movie and asked me if I would work with him on its production. I put my writing on hold, and began working on his first feature film, *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001).

Which job do you feel helped you learn the most?
ZA: Kama Sutra. Because that was the first film I ever worked on, and it was a very big film and it was being made in a very different way. It was shot in sync sound, and in one schedule. I did not know anything else at that time; so that became the most important film experience for me. After that, I made a very conscious choice to work on films that were being shot in one schedule, shot with sync sound and in a systemized production. Actually, that is from where we adapted the work culture of our production house, Excel Entertainment.

Who was the producer of your first film?
ZA: Excel Entertainment, Ritesh Sidhwani and Farhan Akhtar. Farhan is my brother and Ritesh was in school with me. I gave them my script to read two years after *Dil Chahta Hai*. They really liked my script and they tried very hard to cast the actors I had wanted. So we met many actors; some would say yes and then back out, so then we shelved it.

Farhan and Ritesh asked me to write another script. (*Thinks*) Actually, it was a unanimous decision to move on with another script. I wrote something else and they liked it and we tried to cast for it too. However, that too did not happen. (*Smiles*)

That's when I was the executive producer in Reema's first film, Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd, and even Farhan's Lakshya. After these two films, I decided to go back to my first script, Luck By Chance and asked Farhan to act in it.

What made you go back to it?
ZA: We decided to shelve it around 2002, and we went back to it in 2008. In those six years, the film business had evolved. There were no multiplexes back in 2002 when I had shelved that script; there was no culture for that kind of a movie then. By 2008, the multiplexes had arrived, so there was more of a market for the kind of film I wanted to make. Corporate producers had arrived on the scene by 2008, so all this made me think we could now make Luck By Chance; and we did. (*Smiles*)

Can you tell us what, Luck By Chance, your first film is really about?
ZA: It is about self-esteem. Our view of ourselves makes a huge impact on our lives, our destiny. Today, I can feel I am a success or I can feel I am a failure because there are many film-makers who are way more accomplished or successful than I am. So I can choose to feel bad about it. Yet there are many people who envy the position I am in. Therefore, it is relative. What I think is important and not what others think.

Farhan produced your film and he was a director by then. Did you have complete creative freedom when you made your first film?
ZA: Yes, I had complete freedom. I think I am very spoilt by them. (*Smiles*) I mostly get my way.

You mentioned some actors went back on their commitment to act in your film. Who were the actors who remained committed to the script even after six years? I think they deserve a mention.
ZA: Mr Rishi Kapoor's faith in my script never wavered. He had agreed to act in my film back in 2002. Later, when I told him we shelved the film because we could not cast the main male lead, he could not believe it. When I called on him again in 2008, he said he was still on for the role. He played the character of producer Rolly beautifully.

Do you have script rehearsals/workshops with actors?

ZA: I do script readings with my actors; the process brings out a lot. You have written something as a writer or director, but there is a certain process an actor has to go through while doing a scene. The actor may question it or suggest what is written does not seem right for him or her, does not seem natural, and may offer suggestions.

When you are acting, the actor – and even the director – gets a sense of what feels natural and what does not. The process of script readings helps everyone understand where the director is coming from; and you kind of understand where the actors are coming from. All this happens at a preliminary stage of production when the stakes are lower.

The pre-production is a good time for ironing out creases that may show up later as an unpleasant surprise at the time of production, when the stakes are higher and huge costs are riding on the director. In pre-production everyone is relaxed because the pressures of shooting are not hanging like a sword on you. It is a great time to get into the skin of the characters and the film.

Another advantage is that the director and actors get to understand the script and each other better, and iron out the different dynamics that exist between co-actors. How actors play off each other is an integral part of directing performance. Further, if some dialogue does not ring true, seems it is not working, you or your writer has ample time to offer alternatives, do rewrites, much before production begins.

Is directing actors a skill?

ZA: There is a skill in directing actors or performance. To begin with, a director should first cast to type. When you cast a character correctly, half your battle is won. Casting is very important. Once you are satisfied with your casting, and

Actors are not props and you cannot tell them what to do or how to do it. You have to co-create the performance with them, so there has to be a two-way communication.

you begin to work with the actors, they seek clarity of thought from you. They look at you because you are helming this project.

Moreover, they are co-creators. Actors are not props and you cannot tell them what to do or how to do it. You have to co-create the performance with them, so there has to be a two-way communication. Being on the same

In a way, you are trying to make actors

reveal parts of themselves that they otherwise would not.

page is very important and you have to be clear with them because they are dealing with their emotions when they are performing and thus are vulnerable at that point. In a way, you are trying to make actors reveal parts of themselves that they otherwise would not.

Acting is a very vulnerable space to be in; you will normally have crew or bystanders staring at the actors while they are bringing out their emotions for the sake of being true to your character. When they are performing, you have to be very clear to be able to tap into the kind of emotions you want from them; you cannot confuse them by not providing them clear instructions.

Further, I think it is very important to have a good rapport with an actor. They should trust you and you should trust them. There

The director has to be true to try to capture the truth of the moment, to create an atmosphere where the actors are going to bare their souls and reveal his or her truth to the director.

needs to be a clear dynamic on what you want to create together. I do not always have clarity of thought, and when I am confused about something I am straightforward about it. I tell them what I'm truly feeling and we discuss it together to arrive at what will work better for the scene. The director has to be true to try to capture the truth of the moment, to create an atmosphere where the actors are going to bare their souls and reveal his or her truth to the director.

Is it okay if a director does not have clarity of thought sometimes and is it good to be up front and honest about it with your actors?
ZA: Always. I am offended if someone is dishonest with me. If someone in my crew messes something up and is honest about it, I am totally okay with it. Not admitting a mistake is the worst thing you can do. As a director, I trust you that if there is something not right, you will point it out to me even if it is your fault. I trust you implicitly. But if you are lying to me, I will not trust you the next time. So, you cannot lie to your actor.

Is it okay if a director does not have answers to every question?
ZA: Everyone on a film set understands that film-making is not rocket science, and we are no genius. We are just creating a film together, it is a collaboration and honesty is very important in any collaboration. The actors need to trust you and they need to know that you will not lie to them.

How do you cast for secondary characters?
ZA: Usually, I work with a casting director; so far it's been Nandini Shrikent and she is a very good friend of mine. We discuss our characters and share references of actors we know, and then approach the ones we know.

For example, I wanted Sanjay Kapoor to play the character of the director. I know Sanjay has a similar sense of humour and he would understand where I was coming from. Sometimes, Nandini begins auditioning people and I see all the auditions she thinks came close to what we wanted. I hear their voice and see how they perform.

She calls in people I have selected for a specific character and she auditions them once again. Then I watch those auditions too. Suppose, for a specific character, there are six actors Nandini has selected, and I like three out of them, we call those three for another audition and those are auditions I conduct myself. I give the actors their scenes from the film to perform.

As a director, I feel it is important for me to audition actors because I need to know how they take to direction. It is very important for me to know if I have an understanding with them.

While directing, do you prefer being next to the camera or at the video-assist monitor?
ZA: I watch the action on the video-assist monitor because it helps me focus and narrow down my concentration. I prefer to watch the action with my headphones on, staring at the action within the frame because I need to see just the frame and not the atmosphere around. I get too distracted by the sounds and the surrounding atmosphere if I am not watching the action on the monitor. Even when the scenes are emotional, I view them on the monitor. Once the actors are clear about what you want from them, they do not really need you right next to the camera, and if they do, the video-assist is not far from the camera.

Is ego management another important skill a director requires?
ZA: Absolutely. But by ego management I do not mean appeasement. A director needs to know how to create a balance between people working on the film.

Which was the most challenging scene to shoot on your first film as director?
ZA: I think the scene with Isha and Farhan in the hotel room while her mother is away. That is also the longest scene in the film. It was a three-and-a-half-page scene and to shoot that in one room was quite challenging. Because you needed to keep it interesting despite it being set in the confined space of a hotel room. In addition, I wanted them to have a certain sexual tension and energy. That is why the two characters just keep moving from one place to another while they are talking till she finally ends up on the bed. That was the toughest scene to shoot but I also had fun.

As a director, which was the most challenging sport to shoot for Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara?
ZA: The Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, Spain. The bulls are unpredictable, and there are people everywhere because the bulls chase the crowd. Therefore, beyond just crowd control, the amount of safety measures that we had to take while getting the shots we needed for the film made it an extremely challenging shoot.

Did you storyboard Luck By Chance*? When is storyboarding important?*
ZA: No. I did not need to. For *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, I storyboarded the action. It's important to storyboard, because then you know exactly what you have to shoot. If you are using effects of any kind, you have to storyboard, so that you know what needs to be locked, because action shoots cannot be ad hoc.

Who was your cinematographer? And how did you select one?
ZA: Carlos (Catalan). I wanted to work with K.U. Mohanan but he was working on Shoojit Sircar's Shoe Bite. I interviewed quite a few people. I chose them from their show reel, or from the films they had done. I gave them my script and they came back to me with their ideas. Carlos was the closest to how I saw the film.

How do you work with a cinematographer?
ZA: We prepare a lot before we go on floor. We talk about the style and approach, and what we want to do with the camera and how we want to tell a particular story. We do a rough shot breakdown of the script, but once we are on the set we block the scene with the actors and then decide what the best way to shoot that scene is.

How do you decide where to place the camera?
ZA: The answer lies in the narrative. You just know where to look at

from. It also depends on what emotion or mood you want to evoke. I think everything else has to add to that. It is always about conveying an emotion. Making the graph at that point believable and taking you, the audience, in.

You tend to use hand-held camera in your movies?
ZA: Sometimes. When I need to convey vitality, life, sense of urgency and freedom; it depends on why you want to do it. I like to move the camera as well. But it depends on what you want to do. I do not think you can blindly copy someone's style. You have to create your own and you have to base it on your own reasons.

Who were your production designer and art director?
ZA: On my first film, the production designer was Anuradha Parikh, and art director was T.P. Abid. On my second film, my production designer was Suzanne (Caplan Merwanji) and my art director was a Spanish girl, Nuria. I was going to work with Suzanne on my first film too, but Suzanne could not adjust her dates when my film got pushed due to some issues. I had worked with Anuradha on *Split Wide Open*, and I knew she had that sense of aesthetics that I wanted. She also likes to work on locations and she creates a subtext which is very important for me. As for my art director, T.P. Abid, he will give you what you need as a director. He researches in depth.

Who was the editor on your first film?
ZA: Anand Subaya. I am comfortable with him. I find his work elegant. He almost rewrites the film with you once you are on the editing table. I think he understands storytelling, he understands pacing.

How do you work with your editor?
ZA: He assembles the dailies/rushes on his own accord. Then I view them with him, because I have to choose every actor's take. I like to do that myself. I sit through the whole thing. (*Smiles*)

What does an editor really bring to a film?
ZA: The editor is almost a co-writer. He co-writes the film with the director during the editing stage. He gives you another perspective. He gives you a sense of what you are trying to say and tells you what is working and what is not. He will perhaps suggest changing the rhythm or the pace. Besides, you need a fresh eye to see your work; somebody looking at it from the outside.

How did you first day of shoot go?

ZA: It was a scene in a restaurant, where Farhan and Isha had hooked up the night before. They were having breakfast with her mother, Dimple Kapadia. I did not choose it to be my first day's scene. I did not have any particular scene in mind to begin my first film, or first day. However, I knew I did not want to get into something too dramatic or the climax because that needed certain graphing, but the rest of it was fine. During *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, the first scene I shot was Farhan and Abhay walking the streets on their way to the art gallery.

Who was the background score composer for your first film, and how do you usually work with composers?
ZA: Shankar Ehsaan Loy. My editor, Anand Subaya, is musically sound, so he brings in many references. Shankar Ehsaan Loy work thematically. I tell them the mood I want and then they create something fabulous. (*Smiles*) I feel there is too much background score in Hindi cinema; it's unbearable. But you have to keep your audience in mind and have to speak to them in the language that they know and understand.

I will give you an example from *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, where I think I went against the usual norms of Hindi cinema. I didn't want to use a score in Farhan and Naseer's scene when he met his estranged father for the first time. But every single person connected to my film suggested otherwise. When that scene begins, the audience should not guess where it is leading. The audience will be bored because they will have guessed from the score how that moment was going to end.

As a film-maker, I want them to pay attention and I cannot allow them to know where the scene is leading. Moreover, I do not want to tell them what to feel because I do not want to impose my judgement on them. I don't want to tell people what to feel. I think the audience in India has always been told what to feel. But we have such good actors, so let their performance lead you to your feelings. Having said that, I do feel the background score can lift a film and make it come alive.

I feel we all have our moments of self-doubt. Is there a moment from your first film that boosted your confidence in yourself?
ZA: (*Thinks*) It was in the middle of a schedule, I was in my vanity van with my friend and still photographer on my film, and I was venting and all he said to me was, 'Eye of the tiger, baby!' That immediately put everything into perspective for me. (*Laughs*) We both still laugh over it. What he meant was that I should not have been looking at anything beyond what needed to be done at that particular moment. At any given moment, I need to focus just on my film. That was the

most effective thing anyone could have said to me at that point. (*Smiles*)

I feel we all have limitations; to what extent are you honest to your crew about your mistakes or confusion?
ZA: I feel people I work with are incredibly experienced and they come to your aid the minute you admit to them you are lost or need their opinion. But if you don't tell them, you will lose their trust. I know this because I have been an assistant director myself and I have worked with various directors. So I know how it works. You know when a director is pretending or is egoistically holding on to an idea or opinion.

To give you an example, during *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*, I was shooting the '*Khwabon ke parindey*' song. I wanted Hrithik to sing a few lines and I did not have a choreographer as I was doing the song myself. I realized it only the night before the shoot that I did not know how to choreograph the lip sync. I called Farhan and Hrithik and admitted that I didn't know how to shoot the lip sync portion. Hrithik started laughing. They both told me to relax and that it would all work out well. I asked them to arrive early at the location. They arrived an hour early on the set, we got the car and tape recorder and we improvised and rehearsed. Nowhere during that hour did my star actor make me feel I did not know things.

Another time, I was shooting the part where Hrithik had to go into the water for the first time with Katrina. We did thirty shots that day. The location was very tough. We had a two-camera set-up. After the shoot, on my way to the hotel, I realized I did not take the close-up of Hrithik fearing the water. I immediately called him up and said I screwed up, I forgot to take the crucial close-up for that scene. Hrithik told me not to stress and that we could pick it up anytime later.

You can be confused but you should at least know that you are and admit it. You have to be brutally honest.

Unlike me, Farhan is a director and an editor. He shoots only what he needs, unlike me who often goes for coverage. Sometimes Farhan asks me what I am planning to cut to next, and I tell him I have no idea and will decide during the edit. And he is fine with that. You can be confused but you should at least know that you are and admit it. You have to be brutally honest. At the end of the day, everybody working with you wants the best out of you and your film.

How do you feel when you see the rushes/dailies the first time?
ZA: Rushes are fine, it's the edit that is frightening. (*Smiles*)

What is the best part about being a first-time film-maker?
ZA: The feeling of making your first film. It's as if you don't care if something is going wrong; your set is not ready and you are like, 'At least I have a set!' You are just so happy shooting. Nothing takes that away from you. That, for me, was a massive thing. It will never come again. The memory is precious.

There are many stages and departments in film-making; is there any one that gets to you?
ZA: I find production very tedious. I find handling money very tough. Hats off to people who do it with a smile. Another thing I hate is dubbing. I have always used sync sound, but you have to dub certain sounds. I hate it when I have to. I feel I am directing it again, and it will never be the same. Moreover, it is very boring because you have finished the process while shooting, yet you have to redo it at dubbing. I don't know how some film-makers dub an entire movie.

Is film-making a journey or a destination?
ZA: Both. No matter how much you prepare, there is a certain magic that happens on the day of shoot that can never happen with me when I am sitting in office and making plans. But at the back of your mind you have a plan, so that you are not lost. Then you have to go with the flow. You always have to keep that destination in mind because you know what you want your film to be. Shots can change, other things can change but the feeling of what you want to achieve should not change. Film-making is a journey to that feeling.

You have a long way to go, but what do you feel after doing three films?
ZA: I feel that I have to tell the stories I want to tell because people can do other films and do better than me but they will not be able to do the films I write. None of my works is very conventional but it is not exactly outside the mainstream. I want to be in the mainstream but I want to say things that affect me. I want to put my value system out there, what I feel about life. That is the only thing that will make me different from others. I may succeed or fail and it is scary but I must. You must always do what you want to do. I cannot decide what the audience likes. I know what I like and that for me is what makes me who I am.

If you had a child and she wanted to be a film-maker, what would you say?
ZA: Be one. I will ask her what she really wants to do. Then I would ask her to go to a film school and work during summers. I think there

are different kinds of training grounds where you study film as an academic and you look at films and film theory and you look at history of films. But working is practical, it is the ground reality. Both academic knowledge and working skills gained while working on films are important.

Would you like to share something from your experiences with today's generation?
ZA: I feel like you have to spend time with yourself. You have to be aware of what is going on in the real world. You have to be able to take that and your point of view and put that into your work. People will give you advice but it doesn't need to be your path. You have got to do your own thing.

EPILOGUE

The Interface between a Film-maker and a Production Designer

A Conversation with Nitin Desai

MY TAKE

An art director, who often doubles up as a production designer, helps the director create a look of the film. After the director has shared his or script with the art director, the latter's journey in exploring the world of the script and the director's vision commences. The art director and the cinematographer together carry the director's script and vision to celluloid reality. The true beauty of the art director's contribution lies in it being discreet. Mahesh Bhatt sums it up best, 'An art director would be the production designer too. I mean, the idea of a production designer has not yet come to our country, but he or she is a very important entity. The art directors I have worked with have contributed immensely in creating the world of my films. The art director is one of the most important players along with the cameramen. In fact, it's a trimurti – the art director, the director, and the cinematographer. These are the three aces that make the film whatever it is.'

SNEAK PEEK

One of the finest art directors/production designers of Indian cinema, Nitin Desai has won the National Award for his work on films like *Devdas*, *Lagaan* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, among others. After his schooling, he completed G.D. Art., with photography. This background helped him develop a sense of composition of colour and form and a keen sense of perspective. He has handled art direction across the spectrum, from contemporary films to period films, game shows, advertising campaigns and live shows.

Rakesh Bakshi: *Tell us about your origins and how you came to films.*
Nitin Desai: I was born and brought up in BDD, Worli, Mumbai. When I was a young man beginning college, there was no specific career known as art direction; parents wanted their children to be doctors or engineers or IAS officers.

As a child, when we visited our village in Dhapoli, in the Konkan area of Maharashtra, I used to sketch and paint nature, branches of

trees, and craft 3D articles from paper. So nature has always had a great impact upon me. Being artistic in nature, I had an independent streak in me and felt that a desk-job, a nine-to-five career would strangulate me. So I began by starting my own colour lab where I would develop still photographs, expose negatives.

My first break for films came when I processed some prints for art director Nitish Roy-ji. He had come to Mumbai from Calcutta and was working on Govind Nihalani-ji's TV series *Tamas*, and Nitish-ji was introduced to me by a relative. He needed some work done urgently, and I executed it for him. He was pleased that I had done a very good job in such a short time without compromising on quality. So he offered me a job on his film set. I had never aspired to nor known what it is like to work on a film, but I was willing to explore and learn.

I began working with Nitish Roy-ji. I remember it was 9 May and I took bus 398 to reach the studio for the shoot of *Tamas*; it was the first film-related project I worked on. My first day at work was on the set of Om Puri-ji's house in the film. It has been twenty-eight years now. So far, I have executed art in 148 films, 68 TV serials, and 250 to 300 game shows on TV.

How would you define art direction, beyond what text books say?
ND: Art direction is a combination of maya, illusion, and vishwakarma, creation. It's the creation of an illusion as close as possible to reality, or as close as possible to what the story demands, and what the world of the story and characters need. An art director is almost like a surrogate mother, a womb that carries the seeds of the director's vision for the number of months required for the birth of the film. An art director is the one who creates the womb in which the director's vision comes alive.

Do you have a memory of the first time you felt amazed by the art direction in a film?
ND: When I was in school, I saw *Chitralekha* (1964), a historical–philosophical Hindi film, directed by Kidar Sharma. I was fascinated by the drums and the dancers dancing on top of them. And then the drums break open suddenly and soldiers hidden inside appear and a big battle ensues. I wondered how they made all those things happen! Even the Sheesh Mahal in *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) has always fascinated me and I still aspire to construct one in a film someday. In *Jodha Akbar*, Ashutosh had planned one, but then the idea was dropped from the film due to script considerations.

Who are the art directors who have inspired you?

ND: There are many whose work I have loved. I always tell young students of art, and my assistants that it is important to appreciate the work of others if you want to achieve something worthy of your own. The art directors who have inspired me are Murlidhar Ramachandra Acharekar-ji, Sudhendu Roy-ji, Shanti Das, Allan Cameron, he is my idol, and Anthony Pratt.

You have worked with so many directors. Which quality stands out in the good ones?
ND: A good director will always give you a script to read. It helps me with the research I need to do to arrive at the detailing that good art direction requires. Whether it is a big-budget film, or small-budget one, detailing is necessary in our work for it to appear as real and authentic as possible. No one can possibly create reality, however our goal is to try our best to come as close as possible.

After I prepare the rough designs and sketches, I discuss them with the director. This detailed discussion helps me see the vision of the director better, and makes me see how close or far I have come to his or her vision. Then we either go for another design, or tweak what I already have, and the design evolves organically to its final stage.

In the formative years of your career, which was the project on which you gained the maximum experience? Something which has helped your work even decades later.
ND: Every work I have done with every director has somewhere helped my later work. Every film, every director taught me something valuable, and I learnt something from every job. See, an art director is required from start-frame to end-frame on a film, so my growth is natural with every film.

Having said that, there was one job that stands out, and that was Shyam Benegal's TV series of fifty-two episodes, *Discovery of India* (*Bharat Ek Khoj*, 1988). It covered the history of India from the Aryan period to 1947. For that, I had to research and recreate the history of India across centuries. It introduced me to our rich history and the immense diversity of our culture and left a huge impact on me. If you take any challenging film I have done years later, be it *Devdas* (2002), or even *Jodha Akbar* (2008), and some others, all the work I did on *Bharat Ek Khoj* helped me immensely.

What are the usual things you want to know from the director once you have read the script?
ND: Basically, I want to know the format of the story the director wants to narrate. Does he or she wants something realistic, like say, in the style of Govind Nihalani-ji or Shyam Benagal-ji; or something

dreamy like a Manmohan Desai film.

Then I want to know what the colour palette of the film is; which period or era is the film set in. It is possible to keep the period and era authentic, and yet create a different style within that, without going beyond the reality or parameters of that period or era. Then I would want to know about the world in which the story is set, because, no two films ever belong to the same world. The story and characters will be different even if the plot is similar. Just like no two humans can be alike even if they have similar likes and dislikes, or are born in the same family, or share the same history. There will always be some uniqueness.

Then there are films, stories, in which the director does not want to establish where, or in which year the story is set. If the story is set in a specific location, I need to add elements in the sets and locations from those places, so that viewers can identify with those locations easily; let us not forget viewers today know what to expect in which locations because of so much media exposure. We have to be honest to them to make the story believable.

I will also want to know how much of the film and which portions are going to be shot outdoors and which will be shot indoors. If it is going to be shot outdoors, does the director want a real location, or does he or she want to create a set that looks like a real outdoor. In *Devdas*, the entire film was created in the studio, except for the shot of the steam engine train, and even the railway station was a set that we had created indoors. Madhur Bhandarkar's *Traffic Signal* (2007) was shot completely in a studio set-up. *Salaam Bombay* (1988) was a film we shot completely on real locations. We dress up the outdoor locations to reflect elements necessary for authentic storytelling.

Once a director prepares a script and is ready to begin pre-production, there are many stages at which he requires the help of technicians and creative people to help him convert his or her vision into a film. The first stage he encounters is art direction.

Art direction is not just about making sketches and technical drawings. It's primarily about conception, visualization, which begins in our mind. When we construct a set, we first prepare a sketch, then a skeleton structure, then we execute its fabrication: what will the plaster on it be like; what will be the colours; how much aging will it require; the texture; the decoration; the props that will be required to enhance its authenticity.

What is the one great quality in the good productions you have worked on?
ND: In good productions, particularly Western ones, I have experienced excellent coordination amongst the director, production designer, art director, costume designer and cinematographer.

However, only lately have I started experiencing such good coordination in Hindi cinema. Directors now believe in creating a colour palette for the entire film during pre-production, and they keep the core technicians in the loop about any changes that are made.

When you work with any director, what are you trying to do beyond art direction that helps you as an art director?
ND: I am not only trying to understand the script, I am primarily trying to understand the director too – what does he really want, what is in his head? I need to know them from inside. If I have not understood my director clearly, whatever I may create, however good it may be, it will be rejected because it will not be in sync with the director's vision.

Of course, there are times we argue over our creative differences. Here, I must mention one incident when we were making *Lagaan*. Ashutosh wanted the heroine's room to have a blue tone. Now sandstone has a yellowish off-white colour, so if I added blue to it, the contrast would have been be too much. I wanted to add a touch of pink because I wanted to evoke a certain softness in the romantic song. However, Ashutosh was adamant he wanted a touch of blue and he had his reasons. We argued over it for the three months of shooting. (*Laughs*) Eventually, when we started shooting the song, I applied both pink and blue on the wall as samples and showed him the result. Only then did he agree to go with pink.

Such creative arguments happen often, sometimes I back off, sometimes the director backs off, but not without convincing reasons. However, if that day, Ashutosh had insisted on blue, I would not have argued any further because finally he is the director, it is his film, not mine. The director must be comfortable with what he is doing, I am just one of his cinematic tools.

You have worked with many good directors. Tell us about their technical qualities which you admired.
ND: The good directors I have worked with know not only about the technique of direction, but they also know how to communicate with their technicians; how to manage their creative and technical human resources.

First, they have detailed discussions with each and every technician separately. Then they call for a joint meeting with the core technicians, like the director of photography, the costume director, the art director, production designer, and discuss if everyone is in sync with each other.

Some directors must leave the execution to you completely, whereas some

may discuss in detail what exactly they want. Give us examples of directors who discuss every detail of your work with you.
ND: Sanjay Leela Bhansali, for example, discusses details of the flooring, of the chips that will go into the floor design, which stain glass will be used, what will be the pattern of the stain glass, what colours will they be, how will they reflect and what will the reflection look like on camera, and how will it all look when the camera is moving on a dolly, and so many other things.

Some directors are so inspiring that they challenge me to create the kind of set design I see fit and find a technique to expose every inch of my work, every nook and corner. Sometimes, art directors work very hard on a set and some directors don't show it completely, or some directors are not imaginative enough to do justice to the complete set, so the production money and time I spend on its creation is wasted. Some directors allow me to walk the path I need to walk, and they assure me that they will support me in my vision.

Often, directors ask me to create big sets and then producers blame me for their budget shooting beyond control. There is nothing we can do in those kind of situations. There are all kinds of directors and producers.

Tell us something about what went behind the creation on the village in Lagaan *(2001). It looked so authentic, so realistic.*
ND: Many foreign films portray only the ugly and poverty-ridden side of village life. But Ashutosh and I had been to villages which are clean, organized. Where the homes, though made of cow dung and mud, are neat and clean inside. So that is what we created in *Lagaan*. Ashutosh wanted an earthy, realistic, authentic village, even though they were poor. The entire village was an outdoor set, but people would come up to me and ask where in India the village is situated. (*Smiles*).

Another example of an art director's work looking authentic is a lighthouse we constructed in the film *Khamoshi* (1996). While we were shooting the scene by the seaside, some German documentary film-makers chanced upon our location, and wanted to capture the lighthouse on their video documentary. They wanted to visit the lighthouse we had constructed. We told them that it was fake. But they refused to believe us and thought we were being difficult, so they showed as official documents to prove they had the requisite permission from the Government of India to shoot at national monuments. Finally, I had to take them up to the lighthouse and show them. Only then did they believe us. (*Laughs*) I think that was a big compliment to the ability of an art director and his or her team.

When I started working on *Devdas*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali told me

that *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999) was a film that belonged to its music and music director Ismail Darbar. But *Devdas* would belong to its art director, which meant the visual element in the film would dominate the frames. That film can be studied by students of art direction to learn about what is possible and how we create sets.

Tell us about how you use colour.
ND: An art director loves to play with colour, however he must know what he wants the viewer to feel on seeing those colours. One colour can evoke different moods in different people but there will be some colours that evoke a common feeling in most people. Warm and cool colours have different effects on our moods. An art director has to treat colour in keeping with the script, and enhance the emotion with the use of an appropriate colour.

It is easy and even fun to play with colours. The crucial thing is to know how to control it. People go gaga about the colours in *Devdas*, but how many have noticed how I controlled them? The volume, the shape, the texture are parameters I use to control the use of colours. Because amongst all this fun and play and control of colour, I cannot lose the character, the story, the narrative, the drama and the emotion. My work must complement the story, not suppress or overwhelm it.

An art director is responsible for every inch and corner of the set, even the parts which are not noticeable but which have a subliminal impact on the viewer's senses. It is the primary responsibility of the production designer and art director that the viewer not be distracted by the set design, colours and texture, so that the audience's focus remains on the character and drama. For that, we have to achieve a high level of authenticity or reality while creating the surroundings of the character.

To bust one myth, art direction does not mean you have to create big sets. To give you an example, a very big producer called me the other day and asked me to come on board his film as the art director, and told me, 'I have feared working with you because you have created such big sets in so many films, and in my films the focus is always on the characters and drama and not the sets.' I told him, 'I created those sets not to entertain people, or to show off my skills, but because those stories needed them, that is how the directors of those films saw the world of their characters. I know your story does not require me to create a larger-than-life world, so you have nothing to fear.'

What other elements, apart from colour, do you need to control?
ND: Budget. We have to have a very good sense of budget to protect

the producer's interest. Because, every story and film has a limitation of budget and we have to be aware of that. We also have to control the time it will take to set up a shot or change set-ups. To give you an example, during the shoot of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, the production was losing a lot of time whenever they needed to shoot Amitabh Bachchan speaking with the participants, because his monitor was obstructing the view. It was taking production twenty-seven minutes to remove the monitor every time they needed to shoot Bachchan Saab's interaction with the participants. So I constructed a hydraulic jack below the TV monitor that would submerge the monitor in less than a minute.

What are the other aspects of art direction that go unnoticed but are a part of your work?
ND: Safety. When we designed the set of *'Maar dala'* in *Devdas*, I knew Madhuri would be dancing barefoot on cut-glass flooring. To avoid any injury, we laced the edges of the cut-glass with plaster of Paris so there were no sharp edges.

Space for the shooting crew is another parameter we have to keep in mind. For example, the doors of a room in a house are around three-and-a-half feet wide. When we build a set, we have to design broader doors for the dolly, the camera, to travel through in travelling shots.

The most important aspect of designing a set or real location is the light source. So, you have to have that knowledge too, about how the director of photography will light his or her set. Reflection is another parameter we have to consider. If the director of photography cannot find a way to control the reflection, he or she will not expose that portion of the set and your effort and money spent on construction will have been wasted to some extent. So I always befriend the director of photography to understand what limitations he is facing with lighting and try to figure out how I can help overcome them.

Another person I befriend is the costume designer. My set must complement the costume and not clash with it. Therefore, an art director has to refer to the colour palette for so many scenes. Every script has a graph of colour which is decided by the narrative so I make notes on the graph of the colour palette for all the scenes. Locations are also decided keeping the colour palette in mind. Every drama has its own colour and texture. The art and costume, and even location, must be in sync with the colour palette decided by the director, and sometimes by the director and his or her production designer. In Hindi cinema, the art director and production designer are often rolled into one.

Today, with computers and the advancement in technology, what is the place of the humble pencil in your life?
ND: The pencil will always remain at the core of art direction. This morning, when I arrived at my office, the first thing I did when I began working on a design was picking up a pencil and sketching the design I saw in my mind's eye.

If you look around my office, every working desk has all kinds of pencils on the table. The pencil will continue to have a place of honour in my life. It's the Gangotri of my work, the beginning, the source of the best designs. Because it all begins with just a dream and a pencil.

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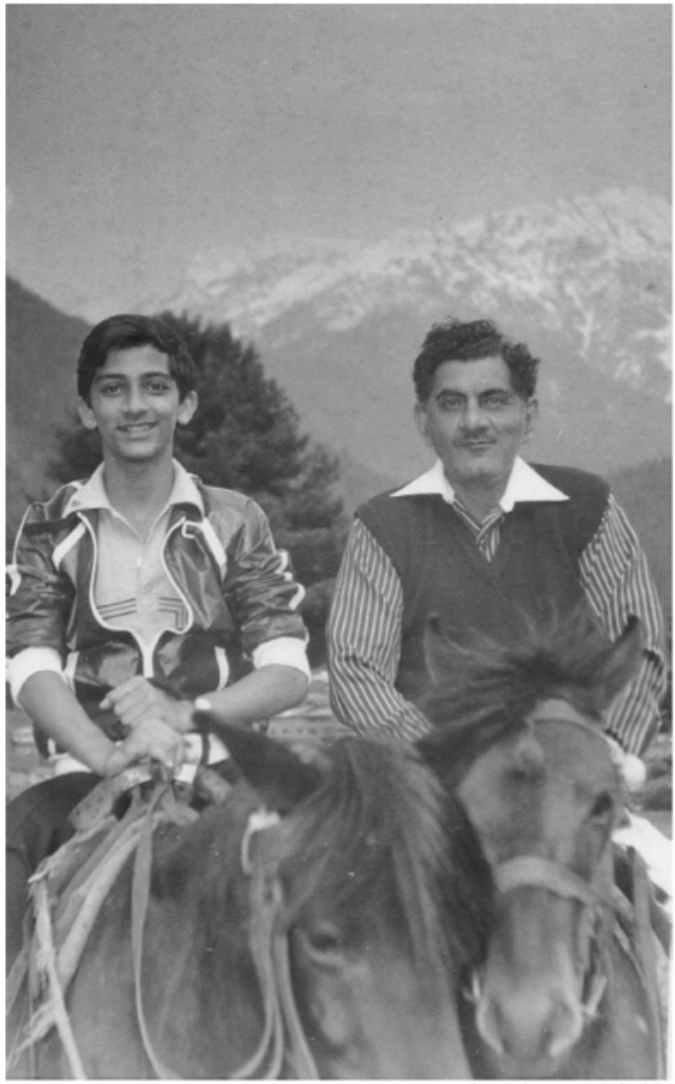

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When the world was young: The author with his father, legendary lyricist Anand Bakshi.

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